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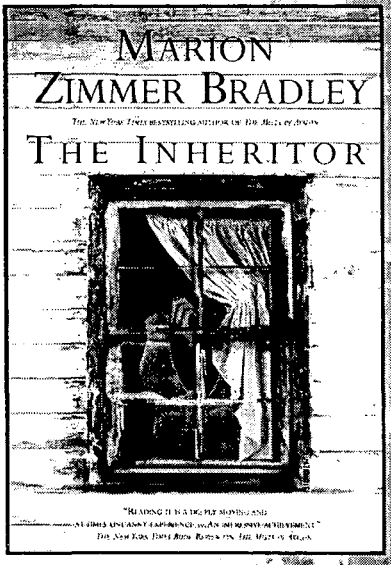

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy&ScienceFiction
April • 48th Year of Publication

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EDWARD L. FERMAN, Publisher — KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH, Editor
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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 0024-984X), Volume 92, No. 4, Whole No. 550, April 1997. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.95 per copy. Annual subscription $29.90; $34.90 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Publication office, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Periodical postage paid at West Cornwall, CT 06796, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1997 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

GENERAL OFFICE: 143 CREAM HILL RD., WEST CORNWALL, CT 06796
EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 420, LINCOLN CITY, OR 97367

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

WRITERS LIVE under an odd set of assumptions. Talk with most aspiring writers, and you'll hear sentences like, "I have to wait until the muse strikes before I can write," or "I would never work from someone else's idea." No other aspiring artist makes such outrageous claims.

Musicians often work with each other's ideas, expanding on someone else's theme. Classical composers like Mozart and Bach often wrote under commission from a patron or for the church. And modern composers do some of their best work for movie scores.

A friend of mine who spent years in art school threw a party when she received her first commission. She knew that the history of painting works like the history of music: many of the world's most famous paintings were commissioned, such as Michelangelo's masterpiece on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Imagine if he had waited for the muse to strike. He never would have accepted the commission, let alone painted it.

Writers who make a living at their work had to train themselves out of those new writer attitudes. No one in the business world wakes up in the morning and waits for the muse to strike before heading into the office. No one would go. It is the same with writers. Some days are easier than others, sometimes the ideas flow and sometimes they struggle out, but the work is usually good whether it comes hard or easy. Professional writers know this and show up for work every day, whether they feel the muse or not.

Professional writers also work from other people's ideas and suggestions. Like painters and composers, professional writers look on commissions as a challenge: something that stretches them and makes them better writers. An assigned work is as original as a work the artist has no suggestions behind.

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The assigned work forces the artist to do her best work within certain guidelines — which is what Handel did when he wrote *The Water Music* at the request of the King.

In this culture, we're used to seeing art inspired by fiction. Book covers are usually dictated by the book's content. Some covers are excellent sales tools and lousy art, but other paintings done for book covers have been shown in some of the most prestigious galleries in the world.

What we are not used to are stories inspired by art. It does happen. For example, our December 1993 cover story, "Susan," by Harlan Ellison was based on a Jacek Jerka painting. But we've never actually assigned stories to be written around paintings — not like we assign art to be painted around stories, something we do every month.

Until this issue. We had a lovely painting by Barclay Shaw in our files, and we had no story to go with it. We decided to ask three writers to base their stories on the paintings. Writers may work from the same inspiration, but they do not *ever* come up with the same stories. We asked three writers who are known for their talent, their willingness to work under deadline, and their ability to meet challenges: Mike Resnick, Esther Friesner, and Nina Kiriki Hoffman.

We sent them copies of the painting and gave them a deadline. But they decided, as a group, to place one more restriction on themselves. Shortly after they received the assignment, they met at a convention and assigned each other genres. Mike got the fantasy story, Esther the science fiction, and Nina the horror. The stories are scattered throughout the issue. See what different and delightful stories these writers have completed from the exact same beginning — this issue's cover.

Writers like Mike, Esther, and Nina trust their talents, and work to improve their craft on a daily basis. They have worked through — or perhaps ignored — those aspiring writer assumptions about waiting for the muse or thumbing their nose at other people's ideas. Professional writers, like everyone else who makes a living at the arts, know that what matters is the work, day in and day out. And working regularly and from a variety of sources helps a writer grow and change and most fully realize his talent.

We've enjoyed our little experiment. We hope you will too.

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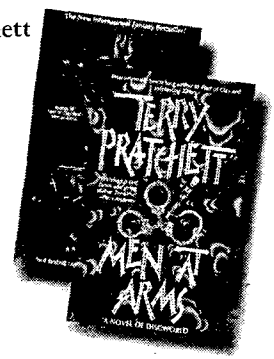

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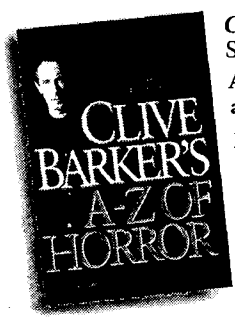

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Since September, we've been running Sheila Finch's loosely related lingster stories about a Guild of Xenolinguists. They've been very well received, particularly her December cover story, "Out of the Mouths." This month, she contributes a chilling tale about life, death, and the importance of communication.

The Roaring Ground

By Sheila Finch

DELFIN HAYWARD CLATTERED down the hallway past the lecture rooms, the leg prostheses turning clumsy in her haste. She'd known better than to linger in the observation room — today of all days — but she'd been compelled by the rare drama of senior lingsters frustrated in interface.

Reaching the examination room, she skidded inside and closed the door, the metal fingers of her exoskeleton engaging the knob nervously. She couldn't get the image of the alien child out of her mind. She'd felt his loneliness and pain as if they'd been her own. But she had to move past it because she'd never get to be a lingster herself if she didn't do well in this final test. Fail now, and there'd be no chance to continue on.

Two examiners wearing the ceremonial cobalt robes of Preceptors of the Guild of Xenolinguists sat at a long oak table, backs to the open window. A cool breeze flowed in from alpine meadows behind the Mother House. Neatly laid out on the table in a ray of wintry afternoon sunlight were the plastiglass vials from a lingster's field pack.

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"Please sit down," one examiner said.

She read coldness from the woman, extreme devotee of the Guild's teachings who'd wiped all feeling from her life, not just from interface.

"*Remember/you, breathe deeply,*" Grayface, the senior dolphin tutor had advised yesterday. She sat and took a deep breath. Being a lingster was all she'd ever dreamed of for the last sixteen years; she'd worked hard, excelled in all the theories and the history her instructors demanded of her. Yet it might not be enough. The Guild had no room for those who couldn't handle interface.

"Is that chair suitable? Do make yourself comfortable." The older examiner, a portly, gray-haired man with a sallow complexion, leaned across the table and smiled.

He meant it as a friendly gesture, but she knew he was determined to show no favors even to one as physically different as she. It was uncomfortable to read people so clearly. She didn't like this skill or whatever it was but she had no control over it.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

The examiners would arrange a computer simulation of a meeting with an alien race. They'd judge the types and amounts of drugs she chose from the field pack, the accuracy with which she managed to decipher a complex message once she'd achieved interface. They'd lay traps. The work of the Guild was too dangerous to allow the weak to qualify. Above all they'd monitor how she navigated through the shoals of the unexpected, vigilant to abort the exam at the first sign of a student losing her way.

She must stay calm, emotionless, only a conduit for communication, a channel through which language flowed. Nothing more. She was not expected to comment or judge, or even react to the message she retrieved. Realizing the examiners still waited for her answer, she nodded.

"Computer will give you preliminary data," the woman said. "Open your link when you're ready."

As she did so, her mind flooded with a torrent of data on an alien she'd never learned about in class. Her stomach cramped. She hated the scratch and sting of information downloaded into her brain at high speed. It always made her feel sick, and it seemed somehow beside the point. She closed her eyes to concentrate on the details of physiology and environment a lingster in the field would expect to know as she started work.

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The flow stopped abruptly. She opened her eyes to find the examiners gazing at her, waiting for her to begin. Her metal hand hovered uncertainly over the row of beta sequence state-alterers. The examiners would be noting her choice.

Better to start conservatively. She selected a mild drug that gave off the sweetly acid scent of pears and dripped the thick liquid onto her tongue. The room hazed over almost immediately. The walls rushed away, the floor dropped out from under her. Kaleidoscopic images tumbled past her eyes.

Take control of apparent time, she'd been taught. *Slow it.* She remembered to breathe. Chaos settled down to more manageable levels. The computer fed her samples of the alien speech.

She threaded her way methodically, using the computer's feedback to map morphemes as she passed. The fog drifted away. Deep structures emerged, skeletal trees in a primeval forest, layered branches of meaning which she tagged in passing, a trail to get her home again. Comprehension grew. Connections appeared, subtleties, a mosaic of grammar and content. The outlines of language emerged — a message to be deciphered —

Abruptly, storm clouds moved over the interface.

A fierce wind tumbled shadows over her path — something hateful shrieked across exposed nerves. Tangled strands of meaning snagged, dragging her down. The path slid under in thundering darkness — She tumbled out of control through nightmare images —

"That will do, Delfin!"

The woman's voice cut sharply across the malformed web of interface she struggled in. Someone grabbed her, dragging her out of darkness into the aching light of the examination room. The contents of her stomach threatened to rush up into her throat, and she found her face wet with tears. The man held out a glass containing the sequence neutralizer. Head pounding, she gulped the chalky liquid down. Slowly, the nausea subsided.

Never let emotion color the interface. She'd broken the first law of the Guild.

"I don't see why not!" the slender, blond boy had said last week as the class discussed the first law. Instructor's pet, he'd been the only one of them who'd dared argue.

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Old Dom Yonato squinted at his students through dust motes spiraling slowly in a ray of winter sun. "Challenge the Guild's teaching, do you?"

The boy smiled, confident of his favored position. "Why isn't it useful in interface, Dom? Nothing else seems to be working with the alien child they brought here!"

His name was Marco, and Delfin, alone in the back row, had never seen anyone more intelligent or more beautiful, but he seemed hardly aware she existed. Deformities of any kind were rare on Earth, particularly severe ones like her own kind of phocomelia; most problems were discovered and fixed *in utero*. Cyberlimbs had long ago made her a loner.

"I mean," the boy continued, running a careless hand through hair the sun's ray turned bright gold, "couldn't emotional response — on a non-verbal level — be the key to unlock communication where conventional means fail?"

"Telepathy?" Dom Yonato said sharply. Favorite student or not, he wouldn't allow heresy to invade his classroom.

She was impressed with Marco's courage, though she knew it didn't cost him much to say these things. Marco was teasing. But it was different for her; she had no choice. She watched the old instructor's face; a dull red flush crept along his cheekbones.

"No lingster has ever found a race using telepathy of any kind in the Orion Arm, young man," Dom Yonato said. "It's a nursery tale that communication could take place from mind to mind."

"Maybe not telepathy, Dom," Marco persisted. "But that doesn't explain why emotion could be dangerous in interface."

The old man came around to the class side of the desk. He hitched his faded green robe over bony knees and sat, sandal-clad feet swinging informally as if to set his students at ease. Delfin wasn't fooled even if the others were. She could feel the underlying throb of his anger.

"There have been one or two lingsters in the past who asked that question — you remember the instructive story of Tobias Naki's death? They didn't last long." His eyes met Delfin's, and she knew the anger was directed at her for some reason. "The Guild is well rid of them."

Blood burned in her own cheeks now. The old man had the voice of a master lingster, compelling and hypnotic, pinning her to her seat by its soft weight.

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"You've been taught the concept of Neutrality. The Guild serves the monster as well as the saint, and the Guild never judges the message, nor the sender, nor the cause. To do so, to become involved in moral judgments, opens the door to destruction. Emotion is the child of the primitive self, not the intellect that serves the Guild."

No, she wanted to say. *No, it's not like that at all!* But he wouldn't understand. Nobody did.

"Children call it the 'art' of the interface, but I tell you it's a science and has no room for emotion. For once a lingster allows emotion to color her responses in that fiery chaos where languages are born, that roaring ground of interface, she loses control. And she will surely be swept down to madness. Perhaps even to death itself."

The room was silent as he finished; not even Marco dared question him further. She knew he'd aimed those words at her alone. She'd tried to hide her inner difference, to be like the others, and maybe some of her teachers might be fooled. But Dom Yonato suspected her otherness ran deeper than cybernetic limbs, and Yonato feared she was a danger to the Guild.

"You may go back to your room now," the cobalt-robed woman said, her voice carefully expressionless.

The afternoon sun had long gone and the examination room was in shadow. The man was assembling the scattered vials and replacing them in the field pack. He avoided meeting Delfin's eyes.

She'd failed. What's more, she deserved to fail. Yonato was right. The Guild had no room for those who couldn't keep emotion out of the interface. She left the examination room, exhausted and hopeless.

Outside, she found Marco waiting for his own test.

"How'd you do?" he whispered. "Are they very cruel?"

She shook her head silently at him and fled to her cubicle in the dormitory and to the forgetfulness of sleep.

The dwarf Tursiops truncatus *breaks the surface. Mynah's sun paints a rainbow arc on her back. She turns a wide dolphin smile to the empty shore, then flashes through bright water out to sea —*

Delfin woke, heart pounding, face wet with tears. Sensing movement, the cubicle's overhead light came on. The rest of the dormitory's

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inhabitants slept peacefully. The sky outside her window was still dark, and a new fall of snow glittered under a moon that had not yet set.

Grayface called the recurring dream a mythology of the mother. In reality, she had no more knowledge of the dolphin surrogate who'd carried her to term on far off Mynah than she had of the human mother who'd killed herself in despair. The Guild to which her lingster aunt brought her shortly after her birth was all the family she knew. Yet the dolphin dream had persisted over the years.

The exoskeleton was suspended above the bed, a silvery spiderweb cage gleaming in the cubicle's light. She leaned toward the release toggle and tongued it on. With a sigh, the exoskeleton descended over her thin body-suit, folding itself around her slight trunk like a medieval warrior's chainmail but light as his lady's shawl. She felt the familiar tickle of neural nets connecting to embedded sockets, linking her to a world of science and logic as it gave her limbs to replace ones the planet's virus had destroyed.

"Your parents were scientists," she remembered her aunt saying, on her only visit. *"Your mother learned too late the secret of Mynah. Why nothing grew there, and all things conceived were born misshapen."*

"Then I'm not alone?" she'd asked.

"A dolphin before you. It didn't live."

Magistra Indira, Head of the Mother House, had directed her to read biography: Sacajaweya and Malinche, early translators who'd walked between the worlds before there were lingsters or a Guild to give them laws. But those women hadn't been suspended between the two-legged and the finned creatures as she was, belonging to neither.

She thought of the alien child. She'd been in the habit of slipping into the infirmary where he was housed to visit him. Like herself, he was a misfit, an orphan brought to the Mother House, lone survivor of an unimaginable holocaust on a planet two thirds covered by ocean. Lingsters whose task it would've been to carry vital information back to Earth had perished in the disaster. The little one was the only witness and he had no words.

Brooding about his plight wouldn't help her own. She pulled long dark hair away from her face and fastened it in a knot at the nape of her neck, then left the dormitory.

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The dolphin pool was dark and smelled of brine and seaweed; a faint glow at the north wall showed where an archway led out to the tutors' private area. A high domed roof regulated temperature and pressure to the tutors' comfort, compensating for the high altitude of the Mother House. Sitting on a submerged bench made by wide steps at one end, she leaned back, hooking the exoskeleton on the waiting metal frame, then slipped it off. Free, she slid under the surface.

Her happiest times were spent here, learning the lessons of evolution and environment that caused the tutors to see the world differently and thus develop language that veered far from the human norm. Her stunted limbs, hideous parodies of a dolphin's flippers and no match for the dexterity demanded of a human, served well enough in this pool.

The buoyant salt water freed her from the painful clutch of gravity. Arching and curving her spine in catlike movements, she undulated up and down the dark pool without the grace of *tursiops* but with a freedom she never knew on land.

A sudden push against her shoulder made her open her eyes again; a familiar smell of fish and ocean flooded her nose. The senior tutor, a smiling gray shape, loomed beside her. He spurted water at her brow, a signal to engage her link.

"Doing/well, you, exam, yesterday?"

She'd learned, as all the students had, to listen past the clicks and whistles of cetacean speech, concentrating instead on the translation in her head. The dolphins too carried microchips, and the computer was supposed to mediate between cetacean and human forms of language. It had worked well enough until recently when somebody decided the program should be redesigned to retain the distinctive flow of dolphin thought.

She leaned her cheek against Grayface's flank, resting her body on him. "I'm not like everybody else. I might as well not be human."

Grayface circled the pool slowly, supporting her. She thought how different cetacean caring was from the sterile science espoused everywhere else in the Guild.

"Physiology affects worldview, you told us. And body image has much to do with language."

"Needing/not, lingster, hands. Knowing, we."

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Without emotion, she thought, communication was condemned to the superficial, like the fractured syntax of this awkward computer translation of Grayface's language. She wanted to use language as the dolphin tutors seemed to among themselves, a stream of bright thoughts with warm shadows underlining, something the computer could never capture but which she sensed through an empathic interface her teachers vehemently denied.

"I feel sometimes as if I was born without a skin, not just arms and legs. I feel other people's pain."

"*Empath, you,*" Grayface agreed.

"Useless ability, according to the Guild!"

She caught the dolphin's amusement with human dogma. Grayface rolled, tipping her onto the wide, shallow steps, then flashed away, water foaming and breaking in his wake. The exoskeleton enfolded her again, and she climbed heavily back out of the pool.

THE EXPECTED SUMMONS to the Head of the Mother House came a day later. With no classes to distract her, Delfin moped about her cubicle, sorting files, tying up loose ends of the first two decades of her life. She'd hoped for an assignment like her aunt's to the Pacific Institute, where the orca tutors would prepare her for service on a water world. Obviously, that would never happen now —

In the middle of the thought, she found her mind flooded with an image of the alien child and a deep sadness filled her heart. She hadn't visited the child much in the last few days, too consumed by her own worries to take on his. She needed to see him again, but first she had to answer Magistra Indira's summons.

The exoskeleton, wonderful as it was, had its limits. Today it chafed her skin at the contact points as if it didn't fit properly. She walked slowly, aware of its limitations, down the long, gleaming hallways where the smells of wax and polish rose like domestic incense, past the dolphin pools and the library to Magistra Indira's private quarters. She dreaded the confrontation that waited for her, Magistra's inevitable disappointment at her failure.

"Come in!" The voice was imperious, a woman used to being obeyed.

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She pushed the unlatched door and went inside. Indira Chen, a tiny, coffee-skinned woman with white hair, wearing an iridescent turquoise sari bordered with silver thread, sat straight-backed at her desk. She'd been a firm but just guardian to the odd child left in her custody, yet in the past Delfin had sometimes sensed reservoirs of warmth that perhaps the woman herself didn't know existed.

Magistra Indira came right to the point. "Your exam results are disappointing, Delfin."

"I'm sorry, Magistra."

"You seem unable to control this unruly passion of yours. We've given you more than one chance. I'd hoped — But I'm afraid you'll be little use to the Guild." Silver bracelets tinkled as the Head of the Mother House closed a book she'd been studying.

Delfin stared at her metal feet. It was what she'd expected. But she could no more change her emotional nature than grow her missing arms and legs.

"I've tried, Magistra."

"I'm aware of that. And I understand your personal difficulties. You've been asked to bear more than the average student who comes to the Guild!"

"I can't help it. I seem to feel what others are feeling. I don't *like* it — I just can't stop it."

"Carrying the world's pain around on your shoulders is for martyrs, not lingsters." Magistra Indira sighed. "I'm trying to decide what to do about you — "

She was interrupted by an urgent knocking at the door. It opened, revealing the old instructor who'd lectured them on the dangers of emotion.

"Magistra? Could you come to the infirmary?"

"What is it, Yonato?"

"The little one!" Delfin said before Dom Yonato could reply. Apprehension flowed through her. "I can feel him."

Magistra Indira and the instructor both glanced sharply at her. The sour wave of Dom Yonato's surprise and annoyance washed over her.

"It's the alien child," the old man said, his hard gaze still on Delfin. "It seems to be in trouble."

"*He*. The little one's male, Magistra! I know that much about him." She took a deep breath to calm her shaking hands. It had to be said now.

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The child was in urgent trouble. "I can — feel — certain things — "

But they were already out of the room. She clattered behind them, metal feet unsteady at speed on the polished wood, not quite catching up as they ran down the hall to the infirmary.

Arriving at the infirmary, Magistra Indira halted beside a small crib that had last been used when Delfin herself came to the Mother House, and Dom Yonato peered over her shoulder. Delfin hesitated in the doorway, temporarily forgotten.

The alien child had grayish skin covered with fine silky down, and his limbs were gangly as a newborn foal's, the thin arms as long as the legs. He lay still, his huge black eyes unblinking, dwarfed by the dials and gauges that monitored his life. A light antiseptic smell lay over the crib like a pall. She didn't know his name if he had one, or the name of the world he'd come from, but she'd experienced his anguish the very first time she'd seen him. His terror was her own. She ached to help him.

"What's wrong with the child?" Magistra Indira asked.

A young male medtech who'd been checking gleaming medical equipment glanced up. He shrugged, wiping a strand of fair hair out of his eyes. "We don't know, Magistra. At least — its vital signs are diminishing from the standards we've observed over the last few weeks."

"But we don't know what's a normal range for this species, do we?"

"No, Magistra."

They spoke about him as if he were some exotic animal, she thought, instead of a tiny child with a hurt so big she was terrified he would drown in it and pull her down with him.

"Yet something's obviously wrong," Magistra Indira said.

A wave of grief hit her. A wail rose into her throat; she clamped her jaws tightly to keep it in. She felt the child's anguish rising up from the pit of her stomach.

"It seems stable enough at present," the medtech said. "But I don't know what we're dealing with here."

"He's lonely!" she exclaimed. "Can't any of you tell?"

They all turned to stare at her. The medtech frowned, and she knew that in his eyes she was guilty of trespassing in his area of expertise.

"This is hardly the place for a *student* to be giving advice," Dom Yonato said acidly. "Especially one who cannot seem to keep her own emotional chaos out of things. Had she not received special dispensa-

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tion — " he glanced sharply at Indira Chen " — she would've been dismissed years ago!"

Magistra Indira met his eyes steadily but said nothing. Delfin said, "At least let me try to comfort him — "

The medtech shook his head. "I don't recommend it."

"Whyever not?" Magistra Indira said.

She felt sick from the child's anguish. Ignoring the argument around her, she stepped forward and stroked his cold brow with the soft pads of her metal fingers. Fear swept up her arm at the touch. He was slipping away — dying of grief — Then her arm was seized in a tight grip.

"You take liberties," Dom Yonato said.

"He's going to die — I know it — I can feel it!"

"What do you feel, Delfin?" Magistra Indira asked thoughtfully.

"He's so — sad, Magistra. I think he wants to die because he's so alone — No one knows what he feels — "

"We've tried everything we can think of," the medtech said.

"So perhaps we can try something we haven't thought of." Magistra Indira turned energetically, the rainbow folds of the sari swirling around her ankles. "I'm of a mind to try an experiment. Yonato, see that we're set to try interface this afternoon."

"Interface has already been attempted, Magistra — multiple times!"

"Not Delfin's way."

The old man stiffened. "Is this wise?"

"I don't see why not. There's a great deal at stake here."

She could feel Magistra Indira's growing excitement at this moment, and something more — a ripple of affection, rusty from long disuse.

"A great deal at stake, indeed!" Dom Yonato said. "This is a student, and not one who shows much promise — "

"Perhaps the promise lies in areas we haven't thought about?"

"Delfin's way — as you call it — is a violation of Guild teaching."

"Guild teaching hasn't brought a solution to this particular problem, has it? Sometimes a too narrow science overlooks practical solutions. I think we should allow Delfin the chance to find something that evades us."

The old man's voice was tight. "The Chapter of Governors ought to be consulted — "

"Lovely if we had the time!" the Head of the Mother House said sharply. "Meanwhile, the child's dying."

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As if he understood her words, the little one mewled weakly. The anger she could sense welling up in Dom Yonato frightened her, a rage that threatened to tear the Guild itself apart. *Not for my sake*! she wanted to cry. But she dared not say a word.

"If I were Head of the Mother House — "

"But you're not, Yonato. I'll make a pact with you. If this attempt fails, I will resign. If it succeeds — "

Dom Yonato stalked out of the infirmary.

THIS TIME the milder beta drugs Magistra Indira chose for her took her into the mist slowly. Or perhaps it was because she was compelled by the child's desperate need to do it right this time, not fight the sensations so bitterly that they drowned her. Her own disappointment and misery didn't matter here. Whether the Guild stood or fell was not important now. Only the child mattered.

At the margin of comfort where the familiar faded and the unfamiliar loomed, she hesitated. Apprehension prickled her neck and snared her breath. The first faint traces of the alien child's sorrow and fear rose to her nose like a sour perfume and she trembled. She picked her way warily for there were no recognizable linguistic signposts to rely on here. Hovering at the edge of this borderland, she was aware of Magistra Indira, small and jewel-hued as a bird, a presence that wouldn't allow her to slip. This time, when the high tide of the little one's grief flowed toward her she didn't fight but accepted it as if she were sliding into the welcoming water of the dolphin pool.

Passion flowed over her like rainbows over sunlit water, and she remembered what she'd known all along. There was no need to hide from who she was. She was no stranger here.

Interface, the roaring ground, the boundary place where worldviews met and overlapped and language sprang up, was a metaphor itself. It wasn't a land waiting for lingsters to conquer with their science and their protocols as old Dom Yonato thought. It was a place of dream, of myth, and the best lingsters had always understood that instinctively. They too felt the siren pull of emotions here, sucking them under, though not as pervasively as she felt them; they survived by armoring themselves against the compelling undertow. They read the patterns of interface and

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they gathered languages as if they were seashells in the palm of their hands.

It worked in most cases the Guild encountered. But she understood now that language harvested that way had no shadow. Such languages died uprooted from their oceanic matrix. The alien child came from a race that communicated on a broader bandwidth than the Guild was used to dealing with. Experienced lingsters had failed precisely because they were not prepared to sense this undercurrent, a bass line carrying part of the tune, incomprehensible without it. She must meet this shadowy underlining, trusting that though she might be swept away she wouldn't be destroyed.

All sensation of her separate self dissolved in the rush of emotion. She disobeyed the first law and let it color the interface.

"*Celebrating, you, difference*?" Grayface sent as the three of them swam together a week later.

She luxuriated in the cool run of water over her body, the sharp scent of salt in her nose, once again free of the rub of the exoskeleton. She still felt weak from the experience of interface, a lassitude she'd known once before after a bout with pneumonia. At Magistra Indira's order, this was the first day she'd been allowed out of bed.

She watched the little one turning, long limbs flashing in the bright water. The language she'd broken through to was already being explored and codified by more experienced — and traditional — lingsters.

"*Serving, ways/other, Guild.*"

She shifted till she could see herself reflected in his small bright eye. "You think there are other lonely babies around the Arm just waiting for an empath to find they want to go swimming?"

Grayface signaled his pleasure at the joke with a spurt of water. "*Messages/some, emotion/not, complete/not.*"

It wasn't a real joke; the problem remained: she'd never be a conventional lingster. Perhaps there were other races in the Arm with shadowed-languages like the little one's, but she wouldn't be able to reach them. She submerged. Underwater, the sounds the dolphin made came clearly to her, a rich counterpoint to the computer's sparser translation so that together the message came fluently: The heart must open as well as the ear.

When she came back up for air, Magistra Indira stood at the edge, her sari — plum colored this time, with a golden hem — trailing in a small

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puddle. She looked as if she hadn't had much sleep. The senior tutor lifted his head out of the water and gazed at her.

"You're right, Grayface," Magistra Indira said. "Communication isn't entirely a matter of the intellect. But it's far too dangerous for lingsters to give way to emotion in interface. I don't see how I can allow them to take the risk."

The turmoil Magistra Indira was feeling in the face of this dilemma spilled over on Delfin. She thought of how the tiny woman had waited by her side through interface, giving her courage to let go and experience the full shock of the child's raw emotion.

Grayface blew water. "*Using, Guild, tools/all.*"

"Some of the elders are deeply unhappy with what we did here. And they're right, of course. The Guild must be protected. Yonato will call for an enquiry, and I must answer to it."

"But you won, Magistra," she said. "We succeeded. And Dom Yonato..."

"Dom Yonato never said what his side of the wager was."

She could take whatever ruling they handed down to her. But she

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couldn't bear the thought of harming this woman who'd been the nearest thing to a mother she'd known. "You took a great risk for me, Magistra."

"I never doubted," Magistra Indira said simply.

The little one undulated past, oblivious of the storm his predicament had caused the Guild. He swam like a dolphin too, she noticed, arms and legs working gracefully, not the clumsy way human children swam, all bluster and splashing.

"Working, Lingster, alone/not. Good plan! Working, we, team," Grayface sent.

"What're you suggesting?" Magistra Indira asked.

The senior tutor lifted himself half out of the water and seemed to backpedal furiously away from them. She couldn't help smiling; even Magistra Indira allowed her expression to become a little less solemn. Then he slid down under the water and left them to solve the problem by themselves.

"A team," Magistra Indira repeated thoughtfully. She became aware suddenly of the trailing sari and lifted it, dripping, in one slim hand. "You, an empath, with another lingster trained to guard as you both enter interface. Not every interface demands this, but occasionally — "

As Magistra Indira paused, Delfin's chest was so tight she could hardly breathe.

"You see, there're a few languages we've encountered already that we couldn't break. Oh, our best lingsters could give us a workable pidgin, but fluency eluded us. Until now we had no idea why."

She hardly dared say it. "Do you think..."

"Your gift may be rare — I don't know, we screen so many candidates out so quickly! But I suspect we'll come to find it's crucial. Perhaps we wouldn't be wise to dismiss our first trained empath so lightly." The sari's golden edge was forgotten and trailing in water again. "We'd have to develop specialized emergency protocols. And where would we send you to train? To the Pacific orcas, do you think?"

She had no words to express the emotion she felt just then. The little one fluttered back to her, and she nuzzled her cheek against him, hearing the tiny purring sound he made. Magistra Indira smiled at her as she rolled in the water with the little one.

Delfin smiled back. She'd devote her life to using this gift wisely. And she'd repay the Guild, with open heart as well as ear.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Neverwhere, by Neil Gaiman, BBC Books, 1996

I've long considered Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* to be one of the better explorations of the collision between the modern world and ancient myth, a series made all the better by Gaiman's gift for characterization and his ability to script plots that actually leave one guessing as to what'll happen next. And, at the risk of making it appear that I discredit the worth of comic books (I like them when they're good; unfortunately too many are dismal rehashes of already bad ideas), I've always wondered how he'd handle straight prose — out there on his own, as it were, without the helping hand of the many fine artists he's worked with in the comics field to bolster his words.

Now it's true that *Neverwhere* isn't his first excursion into prose. Previous to it he collaborated with Terry Pratchett on *Good Omens* (Workman, 1990) and could also be found in *Angels and Visitations*, a collection of short stories published by DreamHaven Books in 1993. But the former, being a collaboration, isn't a true test — it's impossible for us to know who did what and how much of it; while the latter gives no indication of his ability to sustain his strengths beyond the limits of a short story.

So *Neverwhere*, by default, becomes our first glimpse into Gaiman the novelist and quickly proves that he needs no collaborators to work his fictional magic.

The book opens in London with a young businessman named Richard Mayhew playing the Good Samaritan to a girl named Door. For his trouble, he loses his apartment, his fiancée, his job, his very existence in the normal world — becoming as invisible to all who knew him as the homeless are to the upper class — and is plunged into the strange underground other London

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peopled by intelligent rats; angels, knights holding court in subway cars and all manner of marvels and dangers.

The mood Gaiman evokes is at once serious and humorous. Some of the characters remain one-note, but the major players are fully realized. And his underground London — a reversal of the other hidden London above our heads in Christopher Fowler's *Roofworld* (Legend, 1988) — becomes only more fascinating the longer we visit. The plot is somewhat episodic, due perhaps to his sticking too close to his script for the BBC2 television series of the same name, but it carries us through at a brisk pace and never bores.

One word of warning: do yourself a favor and try to track down a British version of the book. Apparently the American edition is going to "translate" all those confusing British terms and flavors under the publisher's misapprehension that we're too thick (whoops, that could be taken for one) to understand them.

The Faces of Fantasy, by Patti Perret, Tor Books, 1996, $40

And now Neil Gaiman makes his second appearance in this column, this time on the cover of Patti Perret's new collection of photographs, a photo which is repeated again inside, along with the portraits of over a hundred other fantasy authors.

The Faces of Fantasy is a companion book to Perret's earlier collection *The Faces of Science Fiction* (Bluejay, 1984). Both books feature photographic portraits of prominent writers in their respective fields on one page with a short piece by the subject on the facing page in which they speak of their writing, how they became writers, what they think of their field, the world in general — sometimes discussing all of the above and then some.

There are a few differences. The sf book was printed landscape and had a short introduction by Gene Wolfe; this one is printed portrait and includes a long introductory essay by Terri Windling discussing the history of the fantasy field and Perret's subsequent involvement in it. The pieces by each individual subject are generally longer in the newer book, though whether that's because of the advent of the word processor (which seem to make even simple correspondence twice as long as it used to be) or because fantasy writers have more to say, you'll have to judge for yourself.

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I have to admit that, as a writer, I was particularly interested in the text. Not having had the chance to meet all of these writers in the flesh myself, or even read interviews by them, I was intrigued by what they chose to reveal about themselves and their work here. My favorite was by Geoff Ryman, which begins, "Gee, I hope I like this picture. I haven't seen it yet...." He goes on to talk about how the person one meets at conventions, readings, etc., is "the less interesting twin who negotiates the real world. What you get in a photograph is the less interesting twin trying to look the part of the person who really writes the books." And then he ends with, "Gee, I wish my books were still in print."

Other favorites were Greer Ilene Gilman, who provides a poem as mysterious and charming as her novel *Moonwise*, Tim Powers speaking of how he can't conceive of a plot that doesn't include "vampires or time travel or orbiting colonies of pictures in old photo albums that come to life and sing offensive songs in the middle of the night," and....

But I'll let you read them for yourself.

What of the photographs? Mostly Perret give us interesting portraits, usually including in their composition something of the authors' private lives and/or interests. There are a couple of faces blurred for what one assumes are artistic reasons, and perhaps more of Peter David than anyone would wish to see, but all in all it's a pleasing collection. There's nothing as outstanding as her Thomas Disch portrait of Disch's face reflected in the shiny surface of a toaster (a play on his charming short story, "The Brave Little Toaster"), but then how many writers do we have who would lend themselves to such a perfect composition in the first place?

The Faces of Science Fiction became a favorite book to bring to conventions for signatures, and I don't doubt that this new volume will be the same, a convenient autograph book to take along in lieu of however many pounds of the authors' books one might be otherwise tempted to stuff in their suitcase.

Blue Limbo, by Terence M. Green, Tor Books, 1997,$22.95

This doesn't bear much resemblance to Green's last novel, *Shadows in Ashland* (Forge, 1996), which we discussed a few columns ago. Instead, it's a sequel to his first

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novel, *Barking Dogs* (St. Martin's Press, 1988), the hard-boiled, futuristic police procedural that first introduced Mitch Helwig, a Toronto policeman who, when his partner is killed by high-tech, illegal weapons, stops playing by the rules.

Blue Limbo's basic plot could probably be summed up in the same few words, except that would only describe the surface story. Running under the immediacy of Helwig's search for the killer of a friend is enough angst and dark soul-searching to do James Ellroy proud.

Helwig has separated from his wife, lost his job with the Toronto police department, and is spinning out of control to the point where it's an even guess if he'll go on a murderous rampage or eat his own gun. His lifelines to sanity are his young daughter, but his wife is reluctant to give him visiting rights; his father, living in a retirement home now; and his one friend on the police force. But then his friend is killed and his family is put in jeopardy....

It's fascinating, heart-breaking material.

Green also packs his new book with high-tech weaponry and gadgets, but the most interesting piece of speculative science is the development of a procedure that will allow a human being to survive for a few weeks beyond death — albeit in an extremely limited state. While kept hooked up to various life-managing equipment, the resurrected can only communicate verbally with the living. They can hear the living, but all their other physical senses are gone, except for sight, and that only allows them a view of endless blue — the "blue limbo" of the book's title. All of which further muddies the question as to when is someone truly dead.

I liked the way Green balanced the hard-boiled action sequences with the more tender and thoughtful scenes, integrating them so that neither jars against the other. If there's one false note, it's a romance that blooms with implausible rapidity towards the end of the book, but by that time the characters have all been in such a dark place, for so long, that the reader is willing to overlook the suddenness of the romance if it means that there can be some happiness in their lives.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Brief Reviews: Books

Sacrament, by Clive Barker, HarperCollins, $25

In an essay a decade or two back, Samuel R. Delany made the case that novels read holographically — that is, not simply as the sum of all their parts, but as wholes that come more and more clearly into focus as they're read. By and large, that's true; a novel's text is large and all but self-repairing. A reader can skim great sections of a book and still recognize it.

Which is to say it seems unimaginable that one scene could spoil the enjoyment of a fine, intricate, and resonant novel — but even so, there is a scene in Clive Barker's *Sacrament* that does everything it can to give lie to an otherwise perfectly serviceable generalization.

Make no mistake: *Sacrament* is a fine, fine book, deep and thoughtful and remarkable in eleven dozen different ways; it makes befuddled bits of the world clear, beautiful, and precious to the eye; it shows that Clive Barker, who showed amazing promise when he burst onto the scene in the mid-eighties, has grown to fulfill and exceed that promise.

It's a masterwork, literally: a novel that shows the world exactly what a writer can grow to be.

And it also contains a scene of a prurient nature involving a minor boy and a woman many years his senior.

Many other horror writers use graphic detail to tell moving stories about child abuse — but the ones who've done it memorably and well told stories that were precisely and directly *about* child abuse. There were graphic scenes in those novels and stories because they were necessary to the tale, and went directly to the point of the thing.

Sacrament is about a lot of things, but child abuse isn't especially one of them. The minor boy in the bothersome scene is a minor

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character indeed — tertiary, maybe quaternary. The things that happen to him in that scene don't have much to do with the book's theme, though they do have bearing on the plot.

Where's the pale? For that matter, *what* is the pale? Those are questions each reader ought to answer independently. All the same, and for all that *Sacrament* is a damn fine book, it's hard to imagine it as an appropriate gift for a favorite nephew.

The Sparrow, by Mary Doria Russell, Villard, 1996

Set sixty years in the future, *The Sparrow* recounts humanity's first contact with extraterrestrials. A handful of men and women led by Emilio Sandoz — Jesuit priest and linguist — discover an alien song and subsequently undertake a harrowing journey to Alpha Centauri to track down the musicians. The ultimate outcome of their voyage is somewhat predictable and the thematic material on the nature of God, humanity, and alienness will be familiar to many sf readers. However, the very accessible prose, engaging characters, and strong plot keep the pages turning. Very nearly living up to the promotional hype, *The Sparrow* is a fast-paced yet thought-provoking book that will linger in the reader's mind weeks and months later.

Deception Well, by Linda Nagata, Bantam Spectra, 1997, $5.99

Deception Well is a colony planet that killed its colonists. Or maybe it's the home of a vast communal intelligence that absorbs anyone who enters its atmosphere. Nobody knows for sure, but the inhabitants of the skystalk city 200 miles overhead aren't willing to find out the hard way. Nor are they willing to let anyone else pass through on their way down the elevator shaft.

But when Jupiter Apolinario and his army come knocking, a decade-long struggle ensues, and it is up to Jupiter's son, Lot, to solve the mystery and lead his people to salvation.

Deception Well is a complex yet fast-paced story set in a high-tech future filled with autonomous nanomachines, inscrutable alien intelligences, and of course, duplicitous humans. Watching how all the elements fit together is half the fun.

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Here's the first in our trio of cover stories. Mike Resnick is a Hugo- and Nebula-award winning author. He's also been nominated for the Best Editor Hugo for the editing he's done on a wide variety of anthologies, including an excellent alternate history series published by Tor.

"The Gefilte Fish Girl" isn't alternate history. It's fantasy, but not necessarily of the dreamy kind.

The Gefilte Fish Girl

By Mike Resnick

SO I WALK UP TO HER AND say, "Ma, we gotta talk."

And she never looks up from the TV, and she says, "Not during *Homemakers' Jamboree*, Marvin."

And I say, "Ma, I'm Milton. Marvin is your goniff brother who is serving six to ten for passing bogus bills." (Which he is. He's a great artist, even the judge admitted that, but he just doesn't do his homework, and printing a bunch of twenties with Andrew Johnson's picture on them is probably not the brightest move he ever made.)

Anyway, she says, "Marvin, Milton, what's the difference, and did you know that Liz Taylor is getting married again? What is it for her now — the thirty-fourth time?"

And I say, "You know, Ma, it's funny you should bring that up."

And she says, "Funny? Okay, Mister Big Shot, tell me what's so funny. Are you the one she's marrying? Go ahead, make my day."

And I say, "Lots of people get married, Ma. Some of them even get

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married to women who aren't Liz Taylor, hard as that may be for you to believe."

And she says, "Lots of *mature* people, Melvin."

And I say, "Melvin is my cousin who ran off with the gay lion tamer from the circus. I'm Milton, and speaking of mature, I'm thirty-four years old."

And she says, "You'd think someone who's thirty-four years old would know to change his socks without being told." Suddenly she curses and says, "See? You made me miss today's health tip. Here I sit, waiting to go to the hospital for a nerve transplant from all the *tsouris* you cause me, and I can't even watch my television in peace."

So I say, "You're in great shape, Ma. Every artery's as hard as a rock."

"*Feh!*" she says. "God has reserved a special place in hell for ungrateful sons."

"I know," I say. "It's probably right next to where He puts all the henpecked husbands."

"Don't you go making fun of my dear departed Erwin," she says.

"I wasn't," I say. "And besides, all we know is that he departed in one hell of a hurry. We don't know for sure that he's dead."

"If he isn't, he should be, that *momser!*" she says.

Well, I can see the thought that he may be alive and God forbid enjoying himself is about to drive her wild, so I try to mollify her.

"Okay, okay," I say, hoping the Lord is otherwise occupied and does not hear what I am about to say. "May God Himself strike me dead if he's not your late husband."

"Well, he was late for most things," she agrees, leaning back in her chair. "Except in the bedroom."

I try to change the subject again.

"We were talking about marriage," I say.

"Someday, when you're old enough," she says, "you'll get married and ruin some poor Jewish girl's happiness, just the way your dear departed father ruined mine, and the only good thing that will come of it will be a grandson who, knock wood, won't take after his father and his grandfather but will show me a little respect and compassion."

I begin to see that this is going to be even more difficult than I thought, and I try to come up with a subtle way to break the news to her. So I think,

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and I think, and I think some more, and finally I say, as subtly as I can, "Ma, I'm engaged."

And she looks away from the television set and takes her feet off the hassock and plants them on the floor, and stares at me for maybe thirty seconds, and finally she says, "Engaged to do what?"

"To get married," I say.

She digs into her sewing kit, which is on the floor next to her, and pulls out a scissors.

"Here," she says, handing it to me. "Why waste all afternoon rushing me to the hospital's cardiac unit? Just stab me now and be done with it."

"Jugular or varicose?" I ask.

"*Schmendrick!*" she says. "How can the fruit of my looms talk to me like this?"

"I'm the fruit of your loins, Ma," I tell her. "Fruit of the Loom is what I'm wearing beneath my pants."

"All right," she says. "Just stand there and watch me breathe my last."

"Your last what?" I ask.

She glares at me and finally says, "Before I die, at least tell me the name of this female person you're engaged to do whatever with."

"Melora of the Purple Mist," I say.

"Melora of the Purple Mist?" she repeats. "How can I fit all that on a wedding invitation?"

"Just use Melora," I say.

"And what bowling alley or topless club did you meet Miss What's-her-name of the Purple Mist at?" she asks.

"I met her at work, kind of," I answer.

"I *knew* it!" she says, poking a pudgy forefinger into the air. "I knew I should never let you take that job with the sewage company!"

"It's a salvage company," I say.

"Sewage, salvage, what's the difference?" she demands. "It's that Gypsy who walks around half-naked with her deathless beauty sagging down to her *pupik*, right? I *told* you she had her sights set on you!"

"She's not a Gypsy, and it's not her. She's just another diver."

"So you're marrying some other girl who lies around on deck with her *tuchis* soaking up the sun," she says. "I should feel better about that?"

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"She doesn't lie around on deck," I say uneasily.

"On deck, below deck, big difference," she snaps.

"Bigger than you think," I say. "The truth of it is, she spends most of her time about fifty feet below deck."

"So she's a diver," she says.

"Not exactly," I answer.

"What, then?"

"Try not to get real excited, Ma," I say.

"I'm not excited, I have convulsions all the time," she says. "Just tell me."

"She's a mermaid," I say.

"As long as she's not that Gypsy girl," she says, fanning herself with the *TV Guide*. "Or that lady bartender from last summer. Or the bug woman."

"The entomologist," I correct her.

"Whatever," she says. "So tell me about this Purple Mist person."

"Like I said, she's a mermaid."

"Like what has a tail and spends her whole life in the water?" she asks.

"That's right," I say.

"Does she wear a bra?" she says suddenly.

"Ma!" I say, outraged.

"You heard me — does she wear a bra?"

"No," I finally answer.

"Figures," she says.

"What a thing to ask!" I say.

"What do you want me to ask?" she says. "My son comes home and tells me he's marrying someone who's covered with scales and spends all her time swimming in salt water, despite what it must do to her complexion. So can she at least get us a price on fresh fish?"

"It's not something I'm real concerned with," I say.

"Of course not," she says. "You're as impractical as your late father." She sighs. "All right, so where did this female person go to school?"

"I don't think she did," I say.

"Ah!" she says with a knowing nod. "Rich family with a private tutor. What temple do they belong to?"

"Who?"

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"Her family," she says. "Try to pay attention, Martin."

"Martin is your nephew who went broke manufacturing the folding waterbed," I say. "I'm Milton, remember?"

"Don't change the subject," she says. "What temple do they go to?"

"They don't," I say.

"They're Reformed?" she asks.

I take a deep breath and say, "They're not Jewish at all," and then I wait for the explosion.

It takes about three one-millionths of a second — a new record.

"You're marrying a *shiksa*?" she bellows.

"I'm marrying a mermaid," I say.

"Who cares about *that*?" she screams. "Call my doctor! I'm having a coronary!"

"Ma, try to understand — there *aren't* any Jewish mermaids," I say.

"It's *my* fault?" she demands. "It's bad enough that you want to give me grandsons with fins — and how in the world will the rabbi perform the *bris*? — but now you tell me that their mother's a *goy*?"

"I knew I was gonna have trouble with you," I say unhappily.

"Trouble?" she shrieks. "Why should there be trouble? Your Uncle Nate will come by with a knife and a cracker and say, 'Is this a jar of beluga caviar?' and I'll say 'No, it's forty thousand of my grandchildren.'"

"Will you at least meet her?" I ask.

"Some conversation we'll have," she replies. "She'll say 'Blub!' I'll say 'Gurgle!' and she'll say 'Glub!' and I'll say 'I'm getting the folds,' and she'll say — "

"That's the bends, not the folds," I explain.

"Bends, folds, what's the difference?" she says. "I plan to be dead of a heart attack in two more minutes."

"She speaks English," I say, getting back to the subject.

"She does?"

"With a beautiful lilting accent."

"I knew it!" she says. "You're too young to remember, but they drove our people out of Lilting before the last war..."

"Lilting isn't a place, Ma," I say.

"It isn't?" she says suspiciously. "Are you sure of that?"

"I'm sure," I say. "She really wants to meet you."

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"I'll just bet she does," she says. "She probably wants to feed me to her pet lobster."

"I don't think lobsters eat people," I say.

"Aha!" she says. "But you don't *know*!"

"We're getting off the subject," I say.

"Right," she agrees. "The subject was my imminent death."

"The subject was Melora."

"What does this fish person who doesn't wear a bra want with you anyway?" she demands. "Why doesn't she go elope with some nice halibut?"

"I met her while I was hunting for treasure," I say. "It was love at first sight."

"So what you're saying is that you went down there looking for gold and what you came up with was a female person of the Purple Mist?"

"You're making this very difficult, Ma."

"You bring home a cod for dinner, and instead of cooking it I have to give it my son, and *I'm* making this difficult?" she says, just a bit hysterically.

I figure it's time to play my ace in the hole, so I say, "She's willing to convert, Ma."

"Into what — a woman with two or more legs?"

"To Judaism," I say. "I told her how important it was to you."

"How can she convert?" she says. "Do we know any rabbis who can hold services fifty feet under the water?"

"She can come to the surface," I say. "How else would we talk?"

"When did you ever *talk* to a girl?" she says. "You're just like your departed father."

"We talk all the time," I say.

She considers this and finally nods her head. "I suppose there's not a lot else you can do."

"Don't get personal, Ma," I say.

She raises her eyes to the heavens — which are just beyond the lightbulb in the middle of the ceiling — and has another of her hourly chats with God. "He wants me to welcome a lady fish into my family and he tells me not to get personal."

"A lady Jewish fish," I point out.

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"So okay, she won't be just a fish girl, she'll be a gefilte fish girl, big deal. What do I feed her? If I give her lox, will she accuse me of cooking her relatives?"

"She eats fish all the time, Ma."

"And when we leave the table to go watch Oprah, do I carry her or does she slither on her belly?"

"Actually, she doesn't watch Oprah," I say.

"She doesn't watch Oprah?" she says, and I can tell this shocks her more than the fact that Melora is a mermaid. "What's wrong with her?"

"She's never seen a television," I say. "They don't have them in her kingdom."

"What are they, some kind of Communists?" she demands.

"They don't have any electricity," I explain.

"You mean she doesn't even have a food processor?"

"That's right," I say.

"That poor girl!" she says. "And no disposal unit in her sink?"

"None," I say, and I can see that suddenly she's working up a head of sympathy.

"How can anybody live like that?" she says.

"She manages just fine."

"Nonsense!" she says. "Nobody can live without a trash masher. My son's wife may be a fish, but she isn't going to slave thirty hours a day just because *I* had to!"

"That's very thoughtful, Ma," I say. "But — "

"Don't interrupt!" she snaps. "You bring her by this afternoon. I'll have some knishes ready, and some blintzes, and maybe a little chopped liver, and we'll watch Oprah and I'll show her my kitchen and..." Suddenly she stops and re-thinks her schedule. "Bring her earlier and we can watch Donahue, too. And tonight they're re-running that old series with Lloyd Bridges. It should make her feel right at home."

"You'll like her, Ma," I promise.

"Like, *shmike*," she says. "If I have to go through life without ever being able to point to my son the doctor, at least I can point to my almost-daughter the gefilte fish girl. Mrs. Noodleman down the block will be so jealous!" She pauses. "We'll have to put a little meat on her bones."

"You haven't even seen her," I say.

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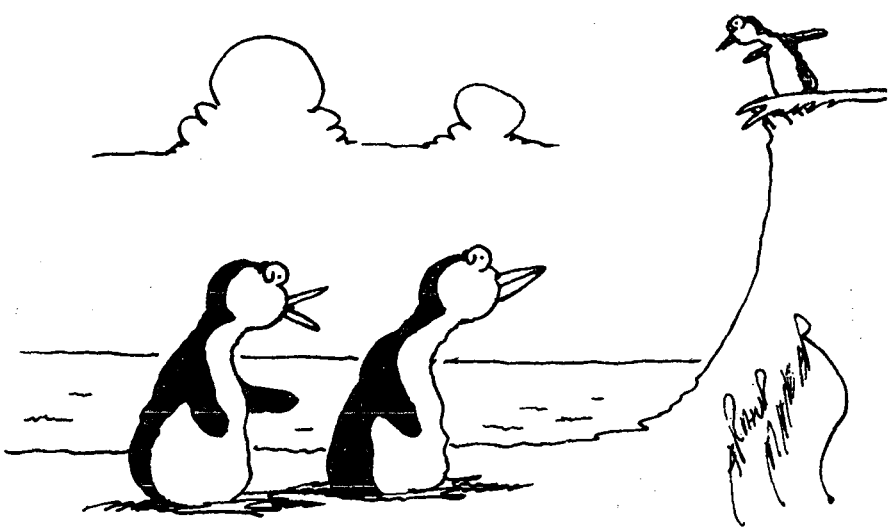
"That's all right," she says. "I know your taste in women. Cheap and skinny."

"Ma, you think any woman under two hundred pounds is skinny."

"And you think any woman who doesn't ask for ice cubes and a straw with her wine is sophisticated." She gets up, and I can see she's getting set for a couple of hours of serious puttering. "Now, you go get her and bring her back, while I prepare something for the poor undernourished thing to eat. And I think I'll invite Rabbi Bernstein, since we need someone to work with her, and he's always fishing when he should be at Temple, and..."

As I leave, she is trying to remember which company sells the pens that write under water so she can send out wedding invitations to the bride's family.



"I think it's time you had that little talk with Billy"

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Over the last several years, Richard Bowes has staked out an area of urban fantasy all his own. In a shadowy New York City, characters who are part myth, part reality wander the streets. In "Streetcar Dreams," he mingles his New York with current Jungian play therapy to come up with the last — and perhaps the best — Kevin Grierson story.

Streetcar Dreams

By Richard Bowes

Prologue

OUR EYES FINALLY MET ON this August morning, you a creature of light and I a middle-aged man in a rumpled suit. When I saw you my eyes filled with tears. I had only just figured out who you are. You have been aware of me for our whole lives. In the last few days, I've thought a lot about my past. Now is the time to tell what I remember.

My name is Kevin Grierson. Last night two things happened: an old lover died and I talked with my Shadow, my Double. It's the first time we've met in over twenty years. Besides looking a lot like me, he now looks just like Death. But I am a New Yorker and try to take these things in stride.

Three days ago, Sunday night at dinner, old friends reminisced. They are all slightly brittle careerists my age who had come to New York for school or their first jobs, and never left. As they talked about their early

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days, I sat silently and remembered my own first, desperate attempt on the city.

1.

It began on a raw night in 1960 with my Shadow and myself under the elevated train platform at Field's Corner in Boston. Our plan was simple, stupid, speed fueled. My parents were dead and I felt it was better to die than go back to school. Across the street, under the neon MALLOY'S BAR AND GRILL sign, was my Uncle Jim's place. I held him responsible for at least half my troubles. In my overcoat pocket was a loaded .38. Jim was going to finance our trip to New York.

My Shadow said, "I'll check the place out." I stood behind one of the iron El pillars and watched a skinny sixteen-year-old dodge traffic.

Then a voice in my ear said, "Rest easy." Uncle Mike the cop patted me down, took the piece out of my pocket. "In the car, Kevy boy. Your friend keeps his distance if he knows what's good for you." We sat in the front seat of his Chevy. "You running away? I'm not going to stop you." Mike broke open the .38. It was loaded. "Coming back here to shoot Jim?"

"Just scare him." I saw my Shadow start to cross the street toward us and signaled him to stay back.

Mike seemed amused. "You with a gun is scary. But the sight of your playmate there is what'd do him in. Jim takes things hard. He's the eldest. Our old man had the first double I ever saw. What is it Aunt Tay calls them? Faileas? Shadows? Your mother had one too. Jim loved his little sister even so. And now you. It kills him. It kills me too. I look at my kids, I think about if that happened, what would I do? Shoot them? Shoot myself?"

He let that sink in. Then he said, "You're leaving, you need money. It's not a great bet. But I'll put some dough on you not coming back. Jim will too. How much do you want?

"Two hundred," I said. I saw my Shadow beside a pillar shake his head. "No. Make it two fifty." That seemed like big money. I was a stupid kid. My double was too.

He had big ideas about sugar daddies and lovely ladies in Gotham. What we found was a lot of people smarter and tougher than both of us put

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together. After a few days, speed and money gone, we sat on the stairs at Grand Central Station. Messed over body and soul, I turned to the dirty, strained face that was also mine and said, "This was your idea. What are we going to do?" All I got back was a duplicate of my own baffled expression. "Get lost," I said. "Get lost!"

As he faded, my bad side, my Shadow, whispered with real surprise. "Guess we can't live on my brains and your ass."

Without him, I lost virginity I hadn't known existed. One night I wandered around Hell's Kitchen west of Time's Square, and a guy smiled in passing. He seemed okay. I wanted someone to talk to and to take care of me and a place to be warm.

Down an alley we went and through a door. In a cellar room, he put his hands on my shoulders, ran me up against a wall. The side of his face he'd kept away from me was so creased by a thick scar that it looked like it had been crumpled. "Don't be scared, little boy," he said. "I'll make sure this NEVER happens to you. Now let's see what you got."

A week later, out on the Deuce in a thin jacket and jeans, I cried on the skinny shoulder of Veronica, a young Spanish drag, in the lobby of a SRO hotel. She said, "Honey, Scar Face is the lowest." Fishing a dime out of her bra, she asked, "Anyone you can call?"

There was. Lots of my family were not anxious to see me again. But my Grand-Aunt Tay begged me to come back, wired the money. Many kids in my situation do not get that grace.

2.

That was the memory I ran like a tape at Addie and Lauren's place in Kip's Bay Sunday night. Dinner was on the lamp-lit patio, good food, half a dozen old friends. I let the conversation pass me by. As has happened for more than twenty years, the wine and grass did too.

Always when this happens, I pictured Leo Dunn, the man who brought me off booze and drugs. He sits in a big chair in his upper East Side apartment, his head framed by winter light from a window. "Your addiction is a Silent Partner who will lie and cheat, who will steal everything and leave you broke and holding the bag." When he had said that I started calling my Shadow the Silent Partner. Mr. Dunn has been

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gone for twenty years now; his image is like a talisman rubbed smooth with use.

No doubt my dinner companions attributed my being present and unaccounted for to George Halle's having just been taken off life support. A wondrous soul, George had set me up in the world and now I was helping him out of it.

They were his friends as well as mine. But in this time of awful attrition, I was the one closest to him. Spouse, lover, relative, business partner, are all ephemeral ties, easily broken. In the age of AIDS only primary caregiver continues until death does us part.

At some point the other guests said good-night, patted my hand, told me when they'd visit the hospice. Finally Lauren and I sat in the ground floor consulting room as Addie listened to her answering machine. Lauren massaged my neck. "Think about Christmas in Santa Fe," she murmured, including me in their plans. When her lover hung up, she said, "Talk to you during the week, Kevin."

Addie told her, "I'll be up in a little while." Then we two sat with the lights dim and the windows open on the back yard and midnight. Here in the center of a block of five-story town houses; street noise was muted. A couple argued at an open window, a hundred air conditioners hummed, but Manhattan in August is just quiet enough for us to hear a tug hoot on the East River, the rumble of a long freight train on the Queen's shore.

For a few minutes of harmony, we listened to each other breathe. Long ago, before she met Lauren, after I left George, there was Addie and me. One summer and fall, we went everywhere: plays, leather bars, Hoboken, bed. In my relations with humans, that species whose shadows don't speak to them, I specialize in six weeks of frenzy and a lifetime of exchanging casserole recipes.

Middle age helps reduce all our faces to professional expressions. Addie, for instance, radiates calm and compassion, a handsome priestess. I have the antique toy dealer's look of quizzical appraisal. But we knew each other before we had fully developed our masks.

"Let me show you what I found." Addie rose and I followed her into the blue room. She flicked a switch and a light came on over the sand table. Four feet square, three feet high, it stood in the middle of the floor. A construction was still intact.

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Addie started taking it apart. I saw a hill molded in the fine, white sand, the sides embossed with sea shells. Turrets and walls ringed the top. At its foot were a two-inch tall bear dressed in a clown suit, a trio of jolly, fat Chinese men, a smiling lady rider on her circus horse.

My first take was that it was a happy scene. On second glance, I saw that the hill was armored: a closed, empty castle. And the figures all faced away from a small pit in the sand where the figurine of a little girl lay face down. "The poor kid who built that," I said.

Addie nodded. "We made progress yesterday. I left this up so Laurie could photograph it." Addie is an analyst. Children are her specialty, Play Therapy one of her tools. On white shelves, built at child's eye level around the walls, sat miniature pagodas and stands of trees, African-American wedding parties and elephant-headed gods, pirates and nurses, three-masted junks, Madonnas, yellow dump trucks, lambs, chariots, anything kids might need to recreate their interior landscapes on the sand table.

I'd helped her find a lot of these items. It's what had brought us together. We had both found jobs that let us play with toys. "See what's new?" she asked. I heard a collector's pride in her voice.

The streetcar stood, green and boxy, trolley up, between St. Francis with birds on his shoulders and a family of giraffes. The color was wrong and the shape, but it made me jump. "You're uncanny! It's so long ago that I told you about the Streetcar Dreams. And I had one last night for the first time in years." She gave a smug smile as if this was an elementary trick of her trade.

I turned to the shelves, saying, "It opened the way they always have. I walked into Union Square subway station. Lots of people and noise. I went up stairs that exist only in these dreams to a platform with tracks at ground level, not down in a pit like subway trains.

"Streetcars stopped running in this city before I moved here. But one swept out of the dark. Orange, cigar-shaped, like they had in Boston when I was a kid. I boarded by the side door, sat at a window. The car started, lights and signals flowed past. We burst out of the tunnel and it was all black and white, New York in a 1940's photo."

As I spoke, I put the toy streetcar down on the sand and ran it back and forth to make tracks. I took buildings from the shelves, sets of European

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row houses, a gas station, a fire barn and crowded them right next to each other on one side of the tracks. On the other side of the tracks, I placed battle ships, an ocean liner, sailboats.

"The streetcar seemed to run down the West Side waterfront, city blocks on the left, piers on the right. It was wartime." I placed marching khaki soldiers and navy blue sailors in the landscape.

"Then I spotted a figure I seemed to recognize walking by. Not a child. Not an adult either." Searching Addie's shelves which held everything from Mongols to angels, I found nothing that looked right. "Whoever, whatever it was started to turn toward me. And I woke up before I saw the face."

"Was it your Doppelgänger?" I had told Addie about my Shadow long ago. She had taken it well, though in psychiatry a belief in a double is the kind of thing that turns up in schizoids facing death.

"No. But my Shadow was on my mind. He hasn't been around for years. Then a couple of weeks ago, a boy I'd just met was convinced he already knew me. A few days later, our old friend Gina Raille asked if I had an evil twin. And today, after the dream, our paths crossed. I think he wants to talk. It looks like he's very sick."

"Oh, Kevin!" Addie hugged me. "You know this is probably a way of dealing with all that's happened to George."

She's smarter than anyone I've known since Leo Dunn. But she thought I was hallucinating. Besides, I'm her friend, not a client. I was imposing. "You're right," I said rising. "It's late. Sorry."

"Not at all," she said as best friends do. When we kissed on her front stairs, huge apartment towers across the way made me feel like we were miniatures on her sand table.

It had been a long day. I took a cab instead of walking the twenty blocks down Second Avenue. Stuyvesant Park was empty, its gates locked for the night. The trees stood motionless by lamp light.

The park shows up in a lot of movies. Odd since with iron fences, the Friends' Meeting House, the statue of One-Legged Peter Stuyvesant, the flowers planted by the Episcopal Church ladies, it looks like something from a more quaint and quiet town. My apartment faces the north side of the park. I'm on the third floor. It's a quiet building. Everyone else in the co-op is middle-aged too.

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On my answering machine were messages from Edwin Sandler, a remarkably rich antique toy collector, and Oscar Klackman, a minor skell and forger. I had business with both of them. The Dolbier collection, a million dollars worth of antique toy soldiers, was going to auction the next day.

Listening, I got into some pull-ons. The last message was a voice hesitant and lost. "Kevin," a long pause. "Maybe I can see you later." Matt Daniels was the young stranger who had thought he knew me the first time we met.

The Police Academy is in my neighborhood. I looked out the window and saw the streets full of cadets in overseas caps, cop shoes, paramilitary uniforms. A group of gay kids in sneakers, button-front boxer shorts and crew cuts passed by. The rival tribes eyed each other warily. Senior year of high school I got forced into both those styles.

3.

Not everyone was happy when Grand-Aunt Tay brought me back from New York. The family house was being sold. My future got decided that Christmas as I lay in bed too sick and numb to care. Even Tay seemed angry. When I was a kid, she had taught me songs, told me stories about elves and changelings and people with Shadows like mine. "Don't you be mad at me, Tay, please, I couldn't stand that."

And she said, "I'm not mad at you, Kevin. I'm afraid for you." She recited a poem. Only now do I understand. At the time it passed right by me. The first verse went:

Just we three go sailing
Me, Myself and I
Over walls and fences
Through the night we fly

At that time in Irish Catholic Boston, a young man in trouble with God and law was treated to a dose of military discipline. My share of the sale of the house sent me to Saint Sebastian, Soldier and Martyr in New Hampshire. That winter, I marched, went to morning mass, studied,

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exercised, prayed, got penitential hair cuts and took cold showers. For all but the last activity I was in some variation of a uniform much like the police cadets wear.

At St. Sebastian S&M, no one knew anything about me, which was good. Beer, let alone drugs, was unobtainable and the brothers of the Sacred Cross made sure even sex with yourself wasn't easy to arrange. One of my roommates prepped for West Point, another prayed in his sleep.

My grades were bad. I couldn't focus. The face in the mirror seemed to be a huge distance away. I thought of ways of dying, hid razor blades, tested pipes to see if they could hold my weight.

That's when the dreams began. In them, I woke up in apartments I'd never seen before, talked to people I didn't recognize. Once, I snapped open something like a switchblade. When someone made a heavy pass, I heard my voice whisper, "I'm not real good at close body work." My Shadow woke as I slept.

Around then I turned from thoughts of offing myself to Science Fiction, *Childhood's End, Twilight World, Citizen of the Galaxy.* Alternate worlds, mutant teens, alien conquerors are an easy fit when you've just done fifty push-ups because your brass wasn't shined, a Doppelgänger cruises your dreams and a man in a dress lectures you about chastity.

THE BROTHERS ALWAYS had the final word. The last day of spring term, I sat at the back of the class reading *A Canticle for Liebowitz,* trying not to notice the graduating seniors saying good-bye. I wasn't among them. "Mr. Grierson will be with us this summer," said the teacher and the seniors snickered. Summer term was the black hole, punishment detail. The uniform featured khaki shorts.

In 1961, being a guy was defined by jeans, black chinos, pegged slacks. The only males between six and forty who wore shorts in public were dorks, fairies, social cripples.

Two weeks later Uncle Bob deposited me at the Park Square bus station. "This is your last chance, Kevin. Blow it and you have no place to go." He seemed as amused as a lawyer ever gets to be by my public depantsing. I stared at my bare knees feeling like all I needed was Mickey Mouse ears and, maybe, polka-dot boxers to make my ensemble complete.

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Uncle Bob drove off and a car full of kids came by. They honked and when I looked their way, they gave me the finger. In my boy scout outfit and last-all-summer crew cut, I was a scary and disgusting sight, a tamed teen with no control over his life. These guys were going to the beach, to see their girl friends, to parties. My life was going to be barracks, mental hospitals, prisons.

Just then, I caught a glimpse of a familiar figure walking up to the Staler Hotel across the street. My Shadow's hair and clothes were cool. He wore a great pair of shades. When I looked again, he was gone.

But I took that eye flash as a kind of promise of what could be. Summer term was kind of loose. I cheated, I flirted, I lied. I even studied. My SAT's and College Board scores were impressive. I'd forgotten I wasn't stupid. The brothers took credit for turning me around. I knew better.

Aunt Tay arranged my late admission to huge, anonymous Mass. Arts and Science. College was good to me. I majored in English but hung around the drama department. I looked young. The parts I got were cadets, little brothers, sons. But the important thing was that amid the general dislocation and chaos of school, I finally learned to play the role of a human well enough to pass.

I'd had plenty of time to edit and shape my adventures. "It was speed and booze," I told my dorm mates in the hard-ass version. "This lady stepped on my heart so I stole a gun, held up my uncle and took off for New York..." Certain details got omitted. My Shadow especially.

More poured out with Sarah, a girl I'd met. "Chicken hawks jump-started me before I knew what was going on. After my mother died, that scene became a big school and family scandal. The only thing I could think to do was run. New York was bad. Since then, I've been afraid to let anyone touch me."

Self-serving no doubt. But getting to take the lead for the first time in my life with someone I cared for soothed me in a lot of ways. As we lay tangled together in the borrowed apartment, though, I saw my Shadow looking on. He had been left out of this account too.

The campus was connected to Boston by a streetcar line. Ever since I was a little kid, I had loved the cars, the old square orange ones, the new cigar-shaped model, liked seeing them lined up in the yards, loved the trolley sparks on wires in the dark, the rattle of the change box, the

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sway of the ride, the clatter of the wheels.

One October afternoon, broke and hung-over, I headed into town. The car rolled through the wooded suburban landscape, past a big house I recognized. In the months before New York, I'd known the daughter of the place. In rosy memory that time had been full of drugs, sex and ready cash.

At that moment, a voice whispered in my ear, "Found your life lacks a certain zest?" I said nothing. I had played this scene out in my imagination many times. My Shadow said, "I want to make up for what happened." When I didn't reply he said, "Without you, I don't even half exist."

This time I would be in control and use my Shadow. I dictated terms. "You stay away from school and my family. Weekends, I'll come in town and we'll get together." He kept his side of the deal for a long while. Going into Boston, I'd take the streetcar and he'd appear as the suburban landscape rattled past.

In town, I slipped into the life he'd established. My face gave me a juicy role: Angel With A Blade. "Bad little boy!" giggled a fat john, slapping my butt. I flicked open my Shadow's gravity knife and put myself firmly back on top.

Booze and drugs made it possible for me not to wonder why I was doing this. It was the age of Speed. Segments of MAS ran on it. In them I was a hero. Junior year, I stood in a pad in Cambridge as a fat lady in an orange muumuu counted out two hundred black beauties for me and my customers. Meanwhile, a skinny, shirtless guy with wild eyes and a machete stuck in his belt tried to focus on my Shadow, who lounged in the doorway. "He's not her double," my Doppelgänger murmured later, "But he's something damn close."

Time ran fast and I turned twenty-one in the spring semester of senior year. After graduation I planned to move to New York. All the kids in the drama department were doing the same, so there would be safety in numbers. I hadn't told my Shadow. Gotham was where you gave your past the slip.

Early one morning, the phone in the hall of the residence house cut through my hangover. On the other bed, my roommate snored in counterpoint to the ringing. It was right outside our door and nobody was getting

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up. Fumbling in vain for my robe, dancing on the cold floor, I went out to the hall. The phone stopped in mid-ring.

And there he was, wearing my bathrobe and my face, speaking in my voice. "Oh my God! Thanks, Uncle Bob. I don't know what to say. I'll be over there as fast as I can."

As he hung up, I whispered. "We had a deal. What are you doing here?"

His eyes, when he turned to me, were unreadable. "Aunt Tay died." I doubled up like I'd been hit in the stomach. He put the robe over my shoulders. "You'll need something to get you through this," he murmured. "There's a half pint of whiskey in the pocket and some dexies. Do you really think you could survive here or in New York without me?" he asked.

"Fuck you," I said. But I didn't tell him to get lost. With Aunt Tay gone, we two were alone. I showered and dressed in what Tay and I called my confirmation outfit: blue blazer, gray slacks and a rep tie. I stuck sun glasses and the bottle in my pockets.

At that hour nobody much was around the campus. The streetcar, though, was full of commuters. We passed the big old house. Over the years, it got more deserted-looking each time.

I put on my shades, got off at the next stop and walked up there. Through the windows, I saw furniture covered with cloths. I went around to the back, found a porch and sat on the stairs. The garden was overgrown, but flowers had started to bloom. Birds sang. A car door slammed a few houses down.

I took out the bottle and drank, a sip at first, then a swallow. "Let me find you some more," said my Shadow. Alone, I thought of Grand-Aunt Tay. The last time I saw her, she talked about the poem she'd told me when I came back from New York. "What was it again?" I asked and she said:

Just we three go sailing
Me, Myself and I
Over walls and fences
Through the night we fly

People half awaken
Hear us pass and pray

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Out of fearing for our souls,
Won't we rest and stay

And I said, "Gee, I thought I had problems and there are only two of me." Tay smiled then and so did I. That was the memory of her that I wanted to save.

4.

My door buzzer yanked me back to the present. I stumbled off of the couch, went to the intercom and said, "Wha?"

"Kevin?" The voice was slurred, uncertain. "Can I come up? Please?" It sounded like Matt. But after ringing him in, I stood ready to slam the door on the off chance I found my own mug coming at me.

Street fashion in clothes and hair were a flash of Saint Sebastian's Summer of 1961. But the face belonged to Matt Daniels, stoned, good-looking and twenty-three. Our first meeting, with him convinced he knew me, should have made me wary. Instead, I had let myself grow fond of this stranger. My Shadow is clever that way.

"Kev!" His body vibrated slightly as he leaned against me. He smelled of smoke and booze, Obsession and sweat, the scent of the clubs. His dark hair was short and slick as an otter's. "Sorry I woke you," he said. "Andre's gone crazy. I can't stay there. I need to lie down." He shrugged. The rest was up to me. Doubtless I was not his resting place of first resort. But his vulnerability chilled me.

In the bedroom he sprawled in nothing but his tan and the tattooed wings over his left nipple, the winding snake on his right thigh. Neither of us was real excited. He smiled, puzzled, as I tucked him in, turned out the light and went into the living room.

Leo Dunn once told me, "We have to perform a delicate balancing act: to remember our addiction, to be aware of it, without ever letting those memories engulf us." Mr. Dunn had identified my Shadow as the manifestation of addiction and depravity. I dozed off wondering why, if the Shadow was evil, I was not all that good.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting at the rear of a moving streetcar. The neighborhood through which we rolled was not unlike the one where

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I grew up. For the first time, I noticed the driver. He looked straight ahead but I knew he had spotted me in the mirror. I counted a dozen passengers. Even from the back they all seemed familiar.

Then I realized they were all people I loved who had died. I was about to get up and go to them when I saw someone in the distance waiting for the car. It was the figure from my last dream, the one I had tried to describe to Addie.

Before we got close enough for me to see the face, a telephone rang and I opened my eyes. The sun shone at a late morning angle. My voice message clicked on behind my head. I lay on my living room couch. After the beep, a familiar voice asked, "Grierson, where the hell are you?"

"Ah. Mr. Sandler," I babbled, trying to figure out what day it was. "How are things in California?" Edwin Sandler is the fat kid who owns all the toys. Malcolm Forbes probably had more. But Forbes is dead while Sandler walks among us still. You may have seen him on the news when he bought an old Southern Pacific roundhouse to accommodate his vintage electric trains. George and I have acted as his New York agents for almost twenty years.

"Did you look at the Dolbier Collection? You were supposed to call. Is lot 98 authentic?"

It came back to me. We were talking toy soldiers, 54 millimeters tall, hollow cast, old. Intensely desirable, at least to Sandler and a limited number of other people. "I had someone look at the lot," I lied. "He says yes. But I'm on my way up to Masby's for the pre-auction viewing."

"Well, if it's authentic, I want it. Don't let that little fart Jonesy get it. He's beaten us out a couple of times recently. You have the list of other lots I'm interested in. But 98 is the important one. And I don't want to pay more than the estimate." Then with no change of tone, he said, "I hear George isn't doing so well."

Some days I was able to spend twenty minutes or half an hour before getting wrenched by a reminder of George. "That's right," I managed to say.

"It's a shame. You and he are young men." All things are relative. Sandler is in his seventies. He hasn't come near either of us since George's illness became general knowledge. I thanked him for his concern and said good-bye, very tired of Sandler and this whole business.

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It was well after ten o'clock. My mind was a blank as I sat up and looked at the catalog again. On the cover, under the title, *The August Dolbier Collection, Antique Toy Soldiers 1885-1920,* I had written, "Ozzie Klackman. Masby's. 11 A.M."

I put a kettle on the stove. In the bedroom, Matt lay, arms and legs akimbo, like he had been knocked flat. When I touched his chest, he stirred. I showered, shaved, had tea and granola. I changed into blazer, slacks and rep tie. I believe that outfit inspires trust. It also reminds me of Tay. "Do I have time for a shower?" Matt stood, hesitant, rubbing his eyes, one foot on top of the other.

This was an act I too once played called, "Pity the poor urchin." But waking up with no clear idea of where you've been and where you're going next is a hard way to start a morning. I wanted to tell him that. I even thought of telling him he could stay.

But if the advantages of commodity sex are neatness and anonymity, those are also its drawbacks. I didn't know where to begin. So I just said, "Sure," and turned to answer the ringing phone.

"Hey, Grierson, you said be at Masby's at eleven sharp, Monday morning. I'm here with my meter running. Where are you?"

"At home, Ozzie, otherwise you wouldn't be speaking to me." Every trade has its skullduggers, resurrectionists, procurers. Antique toys is no exception. Ozzie Klackman is all those things and more.

"Sharp, sharp. Everyone's always saying, 'Old Kevin G. is going soft.' But I tell them. 'No. No. He's still got all his marbles and he's selling them at twenty bucks a pop in that swank little Greenwich Village boutique of his.'"

"Hang on. I'm on my way."

It had taken Klackman to remind me about my own store. I dialed HALF REMEMBERED THINGS. After many rings Lakeisha answered, sounding out of breath. "You just got a UPS delivery," she said. "From Maryland someplace. Gettysburg?"

"Gaithesburg?" Vaguely I recalled purchasing a load of 1950's tin wind-up cars. "I'm not going to be in until late this afternoon." Remembering myself at seventeen, I had qualms about leaving her in charge. "Will you be okay?"

"There is no doubt in my mind." She was offended that I would question this. It was reassuring. Parts of my life still ran in an orderly way.

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By the time I was at the door, Matt was set. "Hopefully, Andre won't be home when I get there. I'm supposed to start at a restaurant part time..." I put a few tens in his T-shirt pocket. There's a cosmic daisy chain in which I get to pay back everything I earned in trade plus interest and inflation adjustment.

As we walked down the stairs, I said, "The first time we met, you mixed me up with another guy. Have you seen him since?" Caught, he paused before he shook his head. Matt is incapable of lying. That is, like then, he can't hide it when he's not telling the truth.

We were on the sunlit sidewalk. Over in the park, the fountain played, a day-care center's worth of tiny kids ran and screamed. A young Latino lady in silk drawers rode by on a bike and looked Matt's way. I said, "The one you met is my Shadow." How to explain? "A slightly less than imaginary friend."

Matt looked puzzled. "He was real, Kevin." I thought he was going to add, "As real as you." Instead he said, "Sorry to bust in on you last night."

"I was happy for the company." We had walked over to Third Avenue. He touched my shoulder as I hailed a cab. "See you tonight?" I asked and he nodded. Driving away, I looked back and saw him at a pay phone. I wondered if he was on his way to my Shadow. Heading uptown to Masby's Auctioneers, I thought of how there was no way to warn the young about pain.

5.

In the Autumn of 1969, a couple of years older and even dumber than Matt, I stood in a kitchen in Cambridge Mass. The woman in the muumuu watched me zip up my fatigue jacket. I was so thin that there was room in my clothes for me and several pounds of methadrine. She stopped mumbling chemical formulae long enough to tell the skinny guy, "Okay, okay. This one is full."

The skinny guy still wore no shirt but now had a Colt automatic stuck in the waistband of his bellbottoms. He had grown a big mustache and his skin was so taut that every rib looked ready to burst out. He pushed open the back door and said, "All clear," in a crazed chipmunk voice.

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Outside the kitchen, an alley ran between wooden houses. Where it opened onto the street, my Shadow stood in a jacket and tie. It made the pair inside too jumpy when they saw both of us together.

"Walk easy," he said. "The heat is only interested in the Commie commune." As we headed for the Central Square subway, Sisters' School kids, home for lunch, ran past us, past a three-story house with red trim and pictures of Che Guevera in all the windows, past the detectives in their car.

Two hours later, I walked through Logan Airport, dressed in the jacket and tie, my flight bag stuffed with crystal meth. The idea was to look like a student, or like the bright young copywriter I had been a year or two before. Then I caught sight of myself in a mirror, minus an overcoat on a chilly day, wearing the shades it was best never to take off, hair down to my shoulders because barbers gave me the same feeling as dentists. I looked like nothing so much as a speed courier.

Guys in uniform moved toward me, blocked the exits, called to each other. I bit my tongue hard, got ready to bolt. The voice in my ear said, "Off-duty pilots, chauffeurs. Nothing to do with us. Take a deep breath."

Northeast Airline's three P.M. New York shuttle was full enough to give me cover but not so crowded that my Shadow couldn't have the seat next to me. Salesmen bent over reports. A silver wing shone outside the window. I had just snorted junk in the bathroom and was serene.

Then I glanced up and saw two stewardesses staring at me.

"Buy your ticket," my invisible friend told me. I drew out the crisp tens I'd put aside and realized too late that one was still rolled up from my bon voyage blast.

The last leg down from Cambridge was by cab. "We split with the crank," my Shadow told me. "Burn everyone before they burn us. Leave no forwarding address."

Ahead of us, the setting sun balanced on the towers of Manhattan. Behind us rose a sickle moon. "Where would we go?" I asked.

"Anywhere. We are about to earn fifteen hundred for delivering sixty-five grand worth of crank. We can go anywhere." I shook my head. The Spanish cabby paid us no mind. We got out in the fragment of a neighborhood where the Queens Midtown Tunnel opens onto Manhattan.

Angie's loft was upstairs in a two-story building on a truncated block. No one else lived on the street of garages and small factories. Behind us,

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rush-hour traffic flowed out of the city like a river. I rang and waited where Angie could see me from his window.

"No wonder they call drug couriers mules," my Shadow whispered. But when I shivered uncontrollably and had trouble stopping, he shut up. Sometimes I scared us both.

Finally, the buzzer sounded. Inside was a flight of stairs. At the top was a door with a peephole. Again I waited as they looked me over. "Run!" my Shadow suddenly cried. And I almost did.

The door flew open. A guy put an automatic at my forehead and gestured me inside. His eyes were dead, cold pins, his mouth a slit. But on his throat was a long curved scar like a smile. Other hands grabbed the bag and hauled me into the room.

Angie and Lars, his partner, lay face down on the Persian carpet in a pool of blood. I got shoved onto the floor near them. My Shadow started talking. "We know the connections, man."

6.

Outside Masby's on Park Avenue I paid the cabby and sized up the crowd. Despite the auction being in the off-season, most major collectors or their agents had gathered. I was willing to bet that none had my exact business background. Masby's staff assigned me paddle #163.

Stepping into the showroom, I nodded to the big white-mustached guy who's a retired colonel, to the Trasks, a husband-and-wife team of gnomes, and to Maxwell Jones, a shiny-faced child of sixty-five. Klackman, my hired accomplice, lounged against a display case. We pretended not to see each other.

Recorded marches played. Tiny conveyer belts drew handpainted guardsmen in red coats, hussars on plunging horses, through display dioramas of castles and battlefields. American Indians in wild, impossible costumes galloped forever around a wagon train. The figures were eighty, ninety, a hundred years old. The kids for whom they had been bought were aged or dead. But here perpetually was the bright, savage world of childhood.

Everyone knew I represented Sandler. Eyes followed me as I approached lot #98. Rare, maybe unique, it stood in a display case by itself:

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French army medical figures, horse-drawn ambulances, supply wagons, hospital tents, stretchers, patients, nurses, doctors. It was attributed to William Britain Ltd., the famous English toy company, made in its Paris office circa 1910. The estimate was $20,000-$24,000 dollars. Sandler always gave a bonus when I bought an item for the estimate or under. It would take some doing in this instance.

Madge Brierly, the decayed gentlewoman whom Masby's has employed ever since I can remember, asked if I wanted the case opened. I nodded and asked, "Are you working the phones?"

"But of course."

Examining a two-inch-tall hand-painted doctor, I tried to remember all that George had taught me. The uniform, once brilliant red and blue, the bright cheeks and black mustache, had in age acquired a nice patina. It showed no signs of retouching or repair. The crucible for toys is their passage through the hands of their young owners. Unworthy, at first, of adult attention, few survive intact. "Much pre-bidding?" I kept my voice low. Such information is confidential.

Her shrug indicated that pre-auction bids were less than the estimate. "It seems August Dolbier's reputation wasn't the best."

Right on cue, a voice called, "Grierson!" Heads turned. Madge stepped away as if to avoid contamination. Shabby, grinning, in need of a shave and doubtless a drink, Ozzie Klackman approached. In a loud, hoarse whisper I hoped everyone caught, he told me. "Anybody can have old antiques. But how many can have brand new ones?"

Value in an antique depends on rarity and integrity. Repairs, repainting, diminish the worth. Fraud and forgery are not uncommon. Those are Klackman's specialties. Everyone knew Klackman had worked for Dolbier and that Dolbier had been untrustworthy. "So what do you think?" Ozzie asked proudly as if it was his work.

The figure looked authentic to me. I replaced it in the case and went on to view other lots. Then the crowd began to buzz. The auction was ready to start. Usually, I stayed at the back of the hall. Today, I was up front in plain sight with Ozzie right beside me.

Hillary Westall, chief auctioneer, bright and stiff as a toy soldier himself, stepped to the podium. Madge Brierly stood at his left, receiver to ear, ready for phone bids. All attention focused on Westall as he said in

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clipped tones, "Lot #1, Britain's set #6. Boer Cavalry. Original box. Circa 1902. Bidding will start at $1,000. It is with the room."

Klackman said nothing. I raised my paddle to establish my presence. "$1,000. Do we have $1,250?" Madge signaled that someone on the phone had topped my bid. The phones were my problem and my opportunity. Madge listened with her gaze fixed on the front window.

Westall looked my way on each lot. I raised my paddle regularly. Klackman said, "Hey, you got that one!" a few times.

"Lot #71. Lucotte Napoleonic General Staff. Thirty pieces. Circa 1890. Bids start at $1,200," said Westall.

A moment later Klackman whispered, "That asshole Jonesy got it for twice the estimate and the only part of it that's authentic is the tail on Napoleon's horse!" I made like I was very annoyed at having lost.

A few minutes later, timing it carefully, I rose and walked up the aisle followed by a grinning Klackman as Westall said, "Lot #98, Britain's depose. Medical..." Jonesy glanced at us sharply and immediately turned his attention back to the podium.

More than face or paddle number, location is identity. An auctioneer looks to the place where she or he last saw the bidder. Giving up the place I'd established signaled to the room that I had no interest in bidding on lot #98.

"We start at $17,500." Immediately, a phone bid came in and Madge relayed it to Westall. Only those in the room had witnessed Ozzie Klackman's fouling the authenticity of this lot. A phone bidder might still be willing to shoot for the moon.

Phone bids came in for $18,000 and $18,500. But those on the scene congratulated themselves on their first-hand knowledge.

As I reached the front window, Westall said, "We stand at $19,000 for a unique artifact. Going once..." I stood behind all the other bidders directly in Madge Brierly's line of sight. She gazed off, thinking, perhaps, of better times. I smiled and lifted my paddle. She listened to a phone bid and looked right through me as she relayed it to Westall.

"$19,500. The bid is with the room. Do we have $20,000. Going once, twice..."

I waved my paddle frantically. Madge squinted, perhaps her eyesight was bad. Then she nodded imperceptibly and signaled Westall. "$20,000. Thank you," he said and everyone present assumed it was a phone bid.

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Then people actually on the phone raised it to $20,500 and $21,000. Again I waved my paddle. Again Madge looked my way but couldn't find me. "Going once, twice..." I handed the paddle to Klackman who waved it back and forth like he was guiding a dirigible in for a landing. She nodded and spoke to Westall. "$21,500. Going Once. Twice. Sold to paddle #163 who has chosen to migrate."

Jonesy turned around amazed and Ozzie Klackman said, "Hey, my meter is running!" In the foyer, I passed him three hundred dollars in tens and twenties and he said, "Very slick, Mr. G. Especially the part where you became the Invisible Man." His voice in my ear that afternoon had reminded me of my Shadow.

After I'd arranged payment and shipping on Sandler's lots, Madge Brierly and I slipped off to a little place around the corner. There I had iced tea and chicken salad while she polished off a surprising number of vodka and tonics and dished the auction world establishment.

I mentioned having been afraid that she wasn't going to recognize my bid and Madge said, "It was odd. I could see that oaf Klackman all too clearly. But you, somehow, kept getting lost against the sunlight in the windows."

Before we parted, I surprised myself by saying, "A good-sized collection is about to come onto the market. Toys of all kinds." The collection I had in mind was the inventory of George's and my store. Until that moment, I hadn't known I was about to sell.

When I was thirteen, I gave away my toys because I thought I was grown up. Actually all that had happened was that someone had sex with me. I thought of that as I paid the cabby on the corner of Bleeker across from HALF REMEMBERED THINGS.

The store exists among Italian bakeries and restaurants. Our front window is set up as a ten-year-old boy's bedroom, circa 1954. The cowboy and rocket ship decor was George's last project.

Inside, framed by Howdy-Doody drinking glasses, a mint Fun On The Farm Game, Sergeant Preston of the Yukon lunch boxes, Lakeisha was on the phone. She buzzed me in without hanging up. Lakeisha is the daughter of one of George's nurses. Just out of high school, she is, like it or not, on her way to St. Regis College in Rhode Island this fall. George wanted very much for her to go to school outside the city.

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She might have done something with her hair since Saturday. But I wasn't sure, so I said, "You look wonderful," which is always safe and true. The curves of her chin, the lines of her cheek are flawless in the way black faces can be. I looked at the register and saw that we had done seventy-four dollars and ninety-five cents business that day. That wouldn't pay the rent.

"That German man from Saturday came back and bought the doll house chair," Lakeisha said after hanging up. "Some people left messages." She looked past me out the window.

Turning, I saw her confidante, Claudia of the three-inch green nails with smiley faces painted on them and Claudia's boyfriend James, a chubby, good-natured kid. Standing behind them on the corner was Lakeisha's latest, Lionel, a wiry little snake. Lakeisha is unlucky in love. "You want to go?" I asked. And as the words left my mouth, Lakeisha said goodnight and that she'd see me tomorrow.

My shop-keeper neighbors don't like seeing African-American kids around. I watched Lionel, almost lost in his baggy clothes, put his arms about Lakeisha. They seemed so young and vulnerable. In the two years I've known her, a couple of Lakeisha's friends have been killed. Claudia's arm was slashed on the subway. Even Lionel I recognized as a fellow changeling trying in all the wrong ways to be mistaken for a human child.

The first couple of phone messages were routine business. A lady asked if we sold sex toys. Some guy wondered if we had Mr. Potato Head WITH his pipe. Then I heard Gina Raille ask, "Kevin, can I talk to you?" Even before returning that call, I knew it was about my Shadow.

Gina and I go all the way back to college. Of all the bunch from the drama department, she's the one who's still acting. This summer, she stepped into a feature role in the musical *Gumshoe!*

A few weeks before, we had run into each other one evening on Broadway and Tenth by Grace Churchyard. She looked at me with curiosity and concern and asked, "Kev, do you have an evil twin you never told anyone about? There's this guy around the theater district. He's raddled, wild. Maybe it's my imagination running away, but he seems to recognize me. I mean, seeing you so fine and sleek, it's kind of stupid but..." Gina shook her head. She had known me in my really bad years.

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When I got her answering machine, I asked, "Hi, Gina, did my double show up again?"

She picked up. "Yes! And he's uncanny. He's not you. But he's close. He got into the theater today. We were rehearsing with new cast. He's done it before. This time he got backstage. I actually spoke to him. He knows a lot about all of us. He wants to see you. Wants you to meet him at the theater. *Gumshoe!* is dark tonight. But tomorrow, would you come? Please!"

She was afraid. "I'll be there." We made arrangements. "Gina, I'm sorry this happened."

"Hey, why the hell couldn't he go up the street and haunt *Phantom of the Opera*?"

Only when I hung up did it sink in that I was going to meet my Shadow next evening. I looked around at the French puppet theater, at the red American Flyer wagon filled with ABC blocks and made a note to begin an inventory.

Then, for a moment, I was aware of an unfamiliar room as pale as a ghost moon. On its floor was a mattress with my Shadow lying on it. His skin was tight over bones, his eyes hollow. My death mask. I thought of the time I lay on the bloody carpet while my Shadow cut a deal for both our lives.

As I locked up HALF REMEMBERED THINGS, I thought of the years that followed the bargain. They were like Tay's stories of time spent in the World Under the Hill. Only glimmers remained. I walked across town piecing fragments together.

7.

One night that I remember, I sat dealing in the Eatery, nicknamed the Speedery, across from the Fillmore East. At my table, a hip, stylishly androgynous neighborhood kid grinned as a voice which could have been mine murmured, "You need a gimmick that will keep a john's attention..."

Outside the window, a black Charger pulled up and beeped its horn. My Shadow nudged me, whispered, "Smiley-Smile." I got up, walked past boys thin and brittle as wine glasses, past twitching, toothless old crank

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heads and the girl in a witch's hat who revolved slowly outside the door. The guy with the slit mouth and dead eyes sat in the front seat of the car. I found it easier to look at the smile on his throat as we exchanged drugs and money then parted.

Back inside, I found my Shadow whispering to the kid, "...Russian roulette. You must know about that. Your folks being Ukrainian." The kid listened with such fierce devotion that I felt sick.

Another night, we walked, my Shadow and I, through the cavernous, deserted Newark train station. In a far corner, lights shone in one ticket window and above the single active gate. It seemed neither of us had any idea how we had gotten there. Then I saw a figure who seemed all silvery and flickering like a silent film. I felt my Shadow beside me suddenly snap to attention.

On a later night, in a junk haze, I rode through wintry streets in the back seat of a big car. My coat and shoes were gone. The heads of the driver and the man with him in the front seat flickered. Smiley-Smile shivered in a T-shirt between my Shadow and me. This time, his eyes weren't dead, they were wide and scared. When I looked, he screamed at me, "What the fuck are you staring at?"

The Silent Movie figure beside the driver half turned to face us. That let me see the butt of the automatic in his jacket. I didn't know the make and didn't want to find out. "Shut up now," he said and nothing more. It seemed that the guy beside me was in awful trouble and that if I thought about it, I'd discover I was too. So I left everything up to my Shadow.

My next memory is of a white room and a guy around my age in a white tunic asking me my name. I tried to answer but found my mouth hurt too much. Besides, I didn't remember. Then he asked, "You know where you are?" I shook my head and he said, "Roosevelt Hospital. In Hell's Kitchen. In New York. Does any of that mean anything to you?" It didn't.

"You were found with damaged nose cartilage, a couple of broken teeth and a three-inch gash above your left eye. Your skull was exposed. We practically had to close you up with bailing wire. It won't be pretty. You have a concussion. And amnesia. You know what that is?" I wasn't even curious.

Afterward, a gray-haired man in a baggy suit read from notes. "We found you two days ago in the basement of the Atlantic Shipping And

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Transfer Building on Twelfth Avenue. You know where that is?" I shook my head.

"Someone called the police to say there was trouble. The first officers on the scene found you face down in the elevator. The door was opening and closing on your head. You had no wallet, no I.D., no coat, no shoes. You had opiates, amphetamine and alcohol in your system. Any idea how any of this happened?"

Faces flickered in my memory. "Silent movie people," I told the detective. He waited. But when I added nothing more, he closed his notebook.

A little later, someone said, "Kevin!" Friends had found me. They brought back a lot. Relatives called and more memory returned. But not everything. Out of the hospital, I crashed on peoples' couches, stayed with Sarah, my girlfriend from college.

My nose was only a little bent, my teeth got fixed at a clinic. But the scar was an angry red gash. The street had reached out and marked me. I thought of Scar Face my first time in the city, of old Smiley-Smile. What I saw in the mirror was a mug that would not look out of place in a gutter.

Life was flat except for a tantalizing sense that part of me was missing. One night on an East Village block lighted by a silvery city glow, a figure in a doorway said "Hello, Kevin." And I remembered my Shadow.

"What happened in that cellar?" I kept my distance.

"The Silent Film boys. Real nasty what they did to old Smiley. You were going to be next. I scared them off." He stepped closer and I saw a scar just like mine. I knew he was lying about scaring anyone off. We had both come close to buying it. But when he held up a sheaf of glassine envelopes and said, "I got works." I asked no more questions. My Shadow stole those years with my collaboration.

8.

I reminded myself of that as I arrived at the Cabrini Hospice, a few blocks north of my apartment. It was there that I practiced my part time job as an angel of death.

George's sister Corrie was just leaving. She said, "A small seizure last night. I cut his nails." We nodded, dry-eyed this close to the end. Corrie

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is his older sister. She and her husband are going to retire to the Yucatan. Their plans are on hold.

In the course of twelve years, I saw George through clinics and wards, support groups and marches. His will to live was a wonder. Now, finally, emaciated, small as a monkey, he lay on his left side with his eyes closed. Single, wirelike hairs still grew out of his head. Treatment for fungal growth made it seem his face had been scoured by fire.

I took his hands and rubbed them. It is felt that patients in coma, with only tubes connecting them to the world, retain the sensation of touch. He had been shaved. A tiny fleck of blood had dried on his chin.

Beside the next bed, an Italian woman in her sixties murmured over her dying son. Maybe she was saying the rosary, maybe she was talking to him, saying things she couldn't while he was conscious. It's what happened with me. All that evening, I sat with George, remembering, speaking softly.

"My life got saved by my bad heart and your good one," I said. In the early eighties. I was the sick one. A couple of my valves gave out, delayed payment for the booze and drugs I'd done years before. The illness and bypass operation took me out of circulation for a few years.

"You dragged me back to life when all I wanted was to die. You smuggled in tiny bites of forbidden desserts, took me to see *Sundays in the Park*. A very serious evening. Lots of times we were the only two laughing." George brought me back healthy to a world where he and everyone else had started to die.

It was late. The Italian woman had left. Rising to go, I leaned over George. "Back when we first met, I wasn't sure it would last long. I feel it again, that this was just a stop on the way. But you are the very best. I hope I've felt for you what humankind calls love."

9.

Two guys knelt on a mattress on the floor of a second-story room. The light was neon shining through the open windows. But I saw the tattoos. Matt Daniels, his body made liquid by junk, arched his back, leaned into the one behind him.

My Silent Partner wore only a sweatshirt and that hung off him. His

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legs were like sticks. I saw lesions. He stroked his partner's back and got ready. Then he sat down and drew Matt to him.

It wasn't the clang of the bell or the rattle of the wheels on the tracks that brought my Shadow's eyes back into focus. It was the burst of sparks from the trolley wire right outside the window. In that brief flash I saw his look of surprise, even of alarm.

At that I awoke. Lying in bed, with The Weather Channel on the screen. I remembered coming home from the hospice, getting a call from Eugene Sandler, eating supper, watching TV. I flicked it off and went into the living room.

Four in the morning is the Devil's Matinee. It's when human confidence is weakest and he whispers all our deepest doubts and fears. "Now, you know where Matt was last night," said the voice which was also mine. "You and I were together a long time, Kevin boy. Everyone else is dead or dying. I'm the only one who wants you."

Always at such bad moments, I wanted to call Leo Dunn. My memory of him in his sun-filled living room was a relic worn smooth by years of use. "Despite what Dunn may have told you, we're not that different," the voice whispered.

Out my window, in the park, leaves shimmered slightly, street lights gleamed off the back of Peter Stuyvesant's statue. A figure sat absolutely still on a bench, For a moment, I thought it was a kid of maybe thirteen. On second glance I saw an adult, though maybe not male or human. This was the figure I had seen in the streetcar dreams. When I looked more closely it was gone. I kept watch but it didn't return.

With the dawn came a telephone call. "You awake, Kevin?" It was Addie. "Come on up and have breakfast." Within the hour, I sat in the back yard with my feet up, telling her and Lauren a lot of what had gone on. Lauren, who hadn't heard about the Streetcar Dreams, asked. "When was the first time you had one?"

"That I remember? Way back. Maybe the Fall of '73. I was in my late twenties and really strung out, living in this flea-bag hotel, the Victoria, up on the Square, pulling stupid, dangerous, penny-ante stuff. If I hadn't been white, I'd have been in jail. My Shadow ran my life. With my permission. I was like a zombie.

"Then, one night, I found myself in the Seventh Avenue IRT Station

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which was an arm pit even back then. I got on a streetcar, not questioning how that was possible. It burst out of the subway onto these World War Two era New York streets. Guys in uniform, women in hats, Buy Bonds posters.

"My father got killed in the South Pacific. He sailed from New York. Maybe that's the connection. The next thing I knew, we had rolled into what looked like my old neighborhood in Boston. Compared to Hell's Kitchen, it seemed open and hilly with lots of trees. I wondered why, since it was so easy to get to, I didn't just live here and commute to the Square?

"Then I saw this kid, thirteen or fourteen, walking down the street. Suddenly, I knew if he turned, he'd be me just before my Shadow poked into my life. That jolted me awake.

"But I wanted to go back. My Shadow was bothered, asked me what was wrong. The dream was something I knew about and he didn't. There wasn't much of that, so I kept it a secret."

Both Addie and I watched Lauren for her reaction. Checking her cameras and equipment, she asked, "Did having the dream change anything?"

"My memories of those years are not real coherent," I said, "But, yeah, I had the dream a few times. The next event in my life that I'm sure of is that I gave my Shadow the slip and found Mr. Dunn."

"So, it's a lucky dream," Lauren said and hefted her bags. "My Italian grandmother used to play the numbers. She had these Dream Books."

"My Irish grandmother did too!" I said. "I'd forgotten Dream Books. Each dream had a three digit number. You had the dream..."

"You looked up the number and played it." She kissed Addie and me. "Streetcar Dream. Play it is my advice." We were all laughing. "See you, Kevin."

Addie saw Lauren off. When she came back, I was in the blue room looking at the toy trolley car, thinking about my Shadow. "Some of her hunches verge on the uncanny," Addie said. Then she asked, "Do you want me to come with you to the theater tonight, Kev?"

"No. But thank you both so much for listening. I've begun to understand something. And thanks also, Addie, for being unprofessional and not trying to have me locked up."

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"Not that the idea hasn't crossed my mind. Laurie and I will be on call for George tonight so you won't have that to worry about. I'll notify Cabrini. And I want to hear from you tonight after you do whatever you think you have to do."

On the way out, I passed her first client of the day, a Latin kid, maybe ten, accompanied by a nanny. He looked straight ahead, walked like an automaton.

At the store, I updated the inventory lists. Tourists, a couple of young guys from Baden, drifted through. Later that morning, I got a call from Meg Brierly up at Masby's. "You mentioned a collection for auction, Kevin."

As we discussed that, Lakeisha came in with her headphones on, gave me a chill, dead-eyed look and went in back. A Haydn Quartet played on the radio. When I hung up, I heard a rhythm like a pump under the minuet.

Lakeisha was in the stock room, face on her arms, sobbing in great regular gasps. This would have to do with Lionel. I took out one of the earphones and said, "Men are pigs, honey."

When she looked up, her eyes were awash. "Lionel said he saw you last night uptown following us." I shook my head but felt a chill. "You closing this place?" she asked with a hiccup.

"Probably." I shrugged. "You'll be going away to school."

"What makes you think I'm going?"

"Because if we have to, your mother and I will stuff you in the trunk of a car and haul you up to Rhode Island." I wondered if this was any different than my getting sent to Saint Sebastian's. But Lakeisha stopped crying and seemed thoughtful.

Then a customer buzzed at the door. It was a woman in her late forties. "My husband is in love with the Hopalong Cassidy blanket in the window," she told me, baffled. "His birthday is coming up."

I nodded, discreet and worldly, a guy who would not come between a middle-aged man and his cowboy blanket. "The price is three hundred." Her eyes widened. The past is always just a bit more expensive than we thought possible. We settled for two sixty-five.

As we boxed the woman's purchase and saw her out of the store, I felt my Shadow very close. "How about lunch?" I asked. Given a choice of anything from French Provincial to Shezuan Chinese within a two block

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radius, Lakeisha wanted McDonald's. Over on Sixth Avenue, I had a salad, but I stole a couple of her fries. They were delicious.

"Kevin, you feeling okay?" she asked.

"I've got the life habit pretty bad," I told her.

"Major commitment!" she said. After lunch, I gave her the rest of the day off. I didn't want my Shadow anywhere near her.

The air turned silvery and a thunderstorm moved across Greenwich Village, settling the dust and driving some tourists into the store. They looked around wide-eyed and left as soon as the rain stopped. All the while, I was aware of my Shadow's dry heaves and throbbing spine, not pain but its evocation.

Then it was time to put on my jacket and tie, lock up the shop, hail a cab and go to meet the old Silent Partner. On the way, another thunderstorm, intense but tiny, moved uptown like it was part of the traffic.

It outran us as we passed Forty-Second Street. The evening sun slanted through Hell's Kitchen and into Times Square. Theater marquees, the headlights of cabs and limos reflected off the wet, steaming pavement.

Cops, uniformed and plainclothes, were out on foot, in cars, and on horseback. The city is twisting the Square, garish, dangerous, sordid, into a Disney theme park. But between the cracks, I spotted trade and dealers, all races, all young, emerging from doorways as the rain passed. For those on the old and the new Deuce the theater crowd has always been like the nightly passage of a magic ship, lighted, loaded with riches, quick to vanish.

Gumshoe! plays the Savoy, a nicely faded old house. This isn't the show about the fall of Saigon, or the singing alley cats who go to heaven on a manhole cover. It's the one written by French people about the private eye in New York in the '30's, the one where the blimp crashes on stage.

At the box office, I gave my name and almost immediately a voice at my elbow said, "This way, Mr. Grierson." I turned to find a guy with the slightly puffy face of a retired cop giving me a slit-eyed stare. With my Shadow around, I'd have to get used to that.

We went through a bronze door and down a few steps. Above us hung an old Manhattan skyline painted loud and flat. Spots dimmed and brightened and from the dressing rooms, a tenor ran the scales. The property manager and her assistant readied a bouquet of roses, a vast spangled bra and bright silver revolver. The security man opened a fire

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door and I followed him into an alley where Gina, all henna-wigged and kimonoed, stood among the company smokers.

"*Tobacco Road!*" she said when she spotted me. We embraced carefully because she was made up and stepped away from the others. "He was in my dressing room. He knew everything. What went on at MAS. That time we found you in the hospital. Things we all said and did. It was so scary. He wouldn't let me leave until I promised to get you up here. Then he was just gone."

She ground a butt under the toe of a purple sling-back. For just a moment I caught a glimpse of a twenty-year-old ingenue. "He won't bother you again," I told her and knew I had to make sure that was the case.

"Kevin, you're wonderful!" Maybe she too glimpsed that other country where we were still kids.

Then someone said, "Ten minutes, please," and security led me to a seat in the orchestra.

"When my friend shows up, we'll leave by ourselves," I said. The cop nodded but didn't smile. The seat next to mine was empty. The house lights dimmed and the conductor brought down his baton.

The third year of a show is when the awards are won, the original stars are gone, the audience is tourists from Iowa and Okinawa. That evening, Gina, as the owner of a Times Square nightclub, gave it her considerable best. The dancers still strutted their stuff and everything was bright and loud. The plot involved a private eye, a taxi dancer and reincarnation. Once or twice I forgot why I was there.

My Doppelgänger still hadn't shown in the second act, when Gina and a Nazi spy had a nifty tango number. Then the blimp smashed into the Empire State Building. It was terrific. In the moment of silence before the reincarnated taxi dancer stepped out of the rubble into the arms of the detective, my Shadow said, "I made you sit through this as punishment." He was back and I didn't tell him to disappear.

The main theme played for the dozenth time. "Let's take a walk west." We went up the aisle during curtain calls. Gina got a great hand. We hit the sidewalk and mingled with a phalanx of a theater party from *Sunset Boulevard* headed for Eighth Avenue.

"Like old times, huh, Kev?" A linen jacket that could have been one I'd had ten or twelve years before hung stained and flapping around his

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bones. His hair was long, disordered. His eyes burned maliciously in a pale face. "It used to be I knew the things you were about to find out. Now I remember the things you forget."

On Eighth, a remnant of the strip still jumps: porn shops, live action theaters, bang-and-walks for the love that just won't wait, tourist hotels for the discriminating out of town Suit John. "They want to call it Clinton, but it's still Hell's Kitchen and the Kitchen starts right here," said my Shadow as we crossed Eighth and headed down a side street.

"Okay, you dragged me back here," I said. "Any particular reason?"

"I thought we'd walk around the old neighborhood, savor some memories." A couple of bars lighted the block. He looked back to see if we were followed, then slowed. "Your life without me was as stupid as that musical," he said.

Ninth Avenue has become quite gentrified, all renovated walk-ups and ethnic restaurants, while retaining convenient clusters of drug dealers on every block. As we crossed Ninth and turned north, a bunch of Spanish guys in a doorway discreetly noted my Shadow's passing. They didn't see me at all.

I followed my Shadow into a liquor store where he pointed to a bottle behind a bulletproof shield and said, "Daddy, buy me that." He stuck the pint of Wild Turkey in a jacket pocket as we turned west again. Halfway down the block, we stopped in front of a flight of cement stairs. They led to a brick alleyway and a door. "The site of Scar Face's apartment is not exactly a big nostalgia stop for me," I told him.

He faced the dark areaway. I heard a seal snap, saw him lift the bag to his mouth. I tasted old memory, felt a forgotten burning in my throat and chest. "I wanted to remind you of the trouble you get in without me, my boy. I followed you here like I did all those other times you sent me away. To make sure you didn't come to more harm than you could handle."

"That's because you needed to keep me alive. It took a while to figure out. But without me, there is no you." We continued west. On the blacktop of a park at Tenth Avenue, thin forms moved under the lights. I heard shouts, a laugh, the drum of a basketball. "Nice job you're doing on poor Matt," I said.

"Matt's a cute, talentless suburban kid. Don't get sentimental. These days, tricks have the lifespan of dogs." He led me across Tenth and down

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a block where teenage girls and their babies sat on tenement steps, past a high rise with a doorman and the old Grand Central Railway cut where far below, in pitch dark, a jungle whispered over rusting tracks.

No one else was on foot as we crossed Eleventh Avenue. I followed my Shadow down a side street lined with parked trucks and shadowy loading docks. At the end of the block beyond Twelfth Avenue lay the Hudson and lighted apartment towers in New Jersey. My Shadow pointed and I looked up at the sign ATLANTIC SHIPPING AND TRANSFER. "This is where the cops found you that time," he said.

"Remember the Silent Film People? They're smugglers. Not of this world. Smiley Smile crossed them somehow. They thought we did too. They had something nasty planned for the three of us. There are passages under these buildings that go God knows where. They dragged Smiley down one. We broke for it and they pistol-whipped you." All of this sounded quite possible.

My Shadow popped a pill, raised the bottle. I gasped as he swallowed. "I stood them off, rang the bell until help came. Instead of running, I saved both our asses." Now he was lying. We had both come close to buying it and he hadn't saved us. The cops who got there in time to scare off the Silent Film People had been called by someone else.

We turned back to Eleventh. It was late. Guys cruised for trade. A car with Jersey plates turned onto a side street. We went that way, past guys waiting in a vestibule.

My Shadow ignored them. "Ever think of how many in the family were, what should we call it? Gifted? I don't mean just the ones with Shadows. Think of Aunt Tay. Remember those poems?"

"Just we three go sailing
Me, Myself and I"

I was aware we were being followed. But he looked toward me for the next lines and I said:

"Over walls and fences
Through the night we fly"

"Second verse!" he said, laid back his head and chanted:

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"People half awaken
Hear us pass and pray"

Someone whispered behind us. Instead of turning, I said:

"Out of fearing for our souls
Won't we rest and stay"

And suddenly no one was following us. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw three young Hispanics cut to the other side of the street. "Strong magic," said my Shadow. "You ever ask yourself what the poem is about? Like, if you're me, and I'm myself, then who is I? Tay herself probably didn't know." Our minds had been running along similar lines. I shut up and waited.

We stood outside a renovated building on Tenth. Years ago it had been a flophouse called Mother's. While staying there I'd discovered Mr. Dunn and left my Shadow forever. "Leo Dunn!" my Shadow said. "He took all our sins and put them onto me. But assuming I'm absolute Evil, how come you're not exactly Good personified? You ever wonder about that?"

When I said nothing, he offered me a swig and chuckled when I shied away. After washing down a pain killer, he tossed the empty bottle in a trash can. Along with a contact wooziness, I caught an aching deep in my Shadow's bones. "You need to be in treatment," I said.

"Right. Except the AIDS safety net is pretty frayed and you happen to be using the identity. Try walking into a hospital and saying, 'Hi, I'm dying and I have no prior record of existence.' I'm tired," he said. "I'm always tired. And in pain too, of course. Walk me home."

He headed west and I followed. "Any idea how you got sick?" I asked.

"Mostly my time was one long doze. But you weren't exactly living your life to the full. I existed on your margins. On occasion I woke up and got real solid. People were doing drugs, screwing like it was going out of style. Which it was. Maybe I wasn't real careful. All I know is that as I got sicker, I've had trouble dozing out. Irony! AIDS made me alive."

We walked up a stretch of Eleventh that's all auto dealerships and way-tough topless clubs like an approach road to any American city. Everything was closed for the night. Trucks whizzed by. "Mostly," he said, "I've tried to stay out of your way. But this concerns you. After Mom

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died, her Shadow disappeared. No one saw Grandad's double once he cooled. And it works the other way too."

It was what I was afraid of. But I just shrugged. "You're sure about that? Substance and Shadow snuff out together?"

"Yeah. I'm sure. But there's a possible escape. One thing I know. You and I aren't exact opposites. Like, say I'm Death and Darkness. Then you should be Immortality and Light instead of just some poor fool scrambling to stay afloat. If we are Me and Myself in the poem, then I is a creature of Life and Goodness."

A tenement stood alone among parking lots. Half its windows were tinned up. We stopped out front. My Shadow gestured to the building. "This is where I live."

"Second floor," I said, remembering my dream of the night before.

That surprised him. But he grabbed my wrist and said, "I need to use the identity while I look for number three. What has to happen is we go upstairs. Change clothes. Change places. You can fade out a little. I'll be a better daddy than you ever were to me, make sure you get drugs and booze, your pick of the runaways. Refuse and I'll fucking wreck your life."

As he spoke, I summoned a memory of being a little kid staring down a subway tunnel for the first glimpse of a streetcar. Then, over my Shadow's shoulder, I saw a single headlight. Above it, behind his window, floated the motorman. I waved and he smiled. My Shadow turned, then jumped away from me like he'd been burned.

The car stopped and its side door opened. Before I got on, I told him, "I know the one you're talking about. Maybe there are answers. I doubt if they'll be ones we'll like. I have a feeling I'll find out very soon. Anyhow, I'll take care of you. Tell Matt what it is you need. We'll use him as a go-between. Other than that, stay away from my friends."

My Shadow stared after me as the car swept away. My heart turned over at the sight of him sick and desperate and so close to being me.

On the car, the first passenger I saw was George. He looked as he had when we met twenty years ago. I knew he had died during the night without me present. I tried to say something and couldn't. I sat down and he took my hand. "Look," he said and pointed outside. In black and white were sailors and women, young and laughing, my parents among them.

Streets ran past and years. I saw myself huddled on a mid-town corner,

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a scared runaway. Ten years later, scarred and red-eyed, I crossed the street on some bad errand. The car ran out of the night and into the dawn. I saw myself first in my thirties and then gray-haired striding on various missions.

When I looked around the car at everyone I had known and lost, I wanted to go and hold each one. I wondered if I too had died. If so it wasn't so bad. "A Streetcar Named Death," I said. George laughed and touched my face. I realized we had stopped.

The other passengers smiled as if amused at a befuddled friend who had gotten on the wrong car. The driver turned around. He was Leo Dunn. "Kevin, where the hell do you think you're going?" The door opened. "It isn't your time or your place."

Then I found myself on the corner of my block. Fire engines roared. The erratic pulse of the city drummed. The morning air was a sticky melange of exhaust, coffee, piss, burned toast, and garbage.

In front of my building stood Addie and Lauren, looking stricken. They'd been told George was dead and now wondered what had befallen me. Lakeisha was crying. And sitting on the stairs, unknown to the others, was Matt, scared and strung out.

Then, walking toward them, I saw you watching over me like a guardian angel. Looking directly at you for the first time, my eyes teared and I started to draw deep sobbing breaths.

Epilogue

Now it is evening and my friends have departed. Matt will fetch my Shadow as you wish. You sit in my house. Your face I see is not youthful but is rather untouched by time and this world. If Aunt Tay was right we will be off and away. If my Shadow's hopes are realized you will save him. Whatever my own fate, I know I am lucky to have made it this far.

My kind does not often survive in the world of man. And if we do it's usually as drunks with glistening eyes, crazies, hooded figures in doorways in the rain. This morning most strangers who saw me crying in the street looked away and hurried past. But a few souls paused and pitied and wondered why. With your permission, this is for them.

—written in the city of New York

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Last year, unfortunately, we missed our unofficial baseball issue. This year, it looks as if we might again. But we have a few baseball stories in our inventory and one of them is a spring training story. So we are publishing "Where Garagiola Waits" before the baseball season begins, because that's when the story takes place.

Rick Wilber, who has published dozens of short stories and poems in a wide range of sf and mainstream magazines, is the son of a professional baseball player. His father played for the Cardinals, Red Sox and Phillies in the late forties and mid-fifties. Then he coached, scouted, and managed in the minors. Rick drew on his father's reminiscences, and his father-in-law's wartime experience in the Second World War, to create this fine addition to fantastic sports fiction.

Where Garagiola Waits

By Rick Wilber

THE THIN RAIN AGAINST the windshield is so cold that Harry can see some of it freezing as it slides down the glass on this raw February morning. It's been a long, cold, gray Midwest winter in St. Louis. He wishes it were spring.

Harry is thinking about the war years. That's where Edna's head has been for the last several weeks, back in the 1940s, so it is natural that he reminisce about those days. Driving the new Buick to the nursing home, driving to see Edna, he thinks back to 1945, which was, for Harry, routine terror, wave-top bombing runs, and then a rising cloud and the end of the war.

He was flight engineer on a Mitchell, a B-25. They called her Stinky, for reasons he can't remember now, and she had the image of a local native chief painted on the side. It was okay to do stuff like that back then. They flew out of Okinawa, dropping bombs on the Japanese Home Islands. The 48th bomb squadron, 41st bomb group. Good bunch of guys.

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On August 6, '45, they took off at 05:30 for a routine mission. They were told to stay at least sixty miles away from Hiroshima. They blamed that rule on the Navy, which always seemed to get the choice targets.

When they got into the combat zone, Harry left his seat in the back of the cockpit and climbed up into the top turret. He swiveled once, all the way around, to make sure it was running smooth on those tracks, and then fired one burst of the twin 50-calibers to clear them.

He was up in the turret, looking toward Japan, when the cloud started rising. Other guys, later, said they'd seen a blinding white flash, but Stinky was too low, down under one thousand feet, for her crew to see any bright light over the horizon line. But that cloud, rising and rising and rising. What the hell was that? Must have hit a hell of an ammunition dump, they figured.

Harry turns the corner onto Essex Avenue, and heads toward Kirkwood Haven, where they are doing their best for poor Edna.

It all started about two years ago. A little forgetfulness, some confusion. More. And then the steady slide into the gray haze. That bright, wonderful woman — gone.

He's all cried out about it. Eventually, you adjust, you have to adjust and deal with it, get on with things, with your own life. And now, at least, she seems to be pretty stable, living in the past for the most part, a better past, really, than the one that really was. And, hell, Harry figures, she can live anytime she wants. He owes her that much, more, after all the stuff that went on back then, after the way he treated her.

Back then, she was home in San Antonio waiting for her war hero, hoping he'd stay alive. They wanted to get married before he left, but her father had talked them out of it. Dad started regretting it the day Harry left town. Dad had fought, himself, in the first war, and, when he thought about it, knew what it could mean to have that love, that wife, waiting. All he could do was wait, and hope that Harry came through it all right, came back as the same guy who left.

Harry heard the story a hundred times. Edna was sitting on her favorite rocker, out under the pecan tree out in the back yard, when her father heard the news over the radio.

"Eddie! Eddie!" he said, yelling out the open kitchen window to her. "Come on in here, sweetie, and listen to this. We've dropped some kind of new bomb on Japan!"

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And Eddie got up from the rocker so fast that she got dizzy, ran three steps, banged her head into that long bottom branch of the tree, and wound up flat on her back.

Her war wound, the family lore went, was worse than anything Harry got in thirty-seven missions.

Which was right, as far as it went. Of course, she didn't see the bomb. Or the pictures, later. Or have to think about it. On a city. Civilians. Children. Little children.

After every mission the guys went through debriefing and then got an inch of whisky in the bottom of their canteen cups. The ones smart enough to drink it went right to sleep, usually. Some guys weren't drinkers. Some guys thought about it all too much. The trick, Harry learned right away, was to not think about it, not think about those bombs and the people down there.

Harry shakes his head. That was such a long time ago.

He pulls into the parking lot of Kirkwood Haven, turns off the wipers, the lights, and opens the door to the cold, wet wind. Damn winter weather, he's so tired of it.

Inside, in the front room, Edna is waiting for him, rocking, smiling. She remembers him today.

"Hello, Harry," she says. "I'm glad you're finally here. Let's get going."

Get going? Oh, Christ, what now, he wonders.

"I hope you brought your suntan lotion, Harry, you know how easily you burn," she says, rising from the rocker and offering her hand, the motion a girlish reflection, coquettish. It's been, god, fifty years, since he's seen that little flick of the wrist, the offered hand, and it all comes back to him in a second.

He takes the hand. He will not, absolutely will not, cry, he thinks to himself. Damn.

"Suntan lotion, Eddie? It's February, dear, and gray, and cold. Let's just sit here and talk, sweetie."

"Oh, Harry, you haven't forgotten, have you?" She smiles at him. "We said we'd leave today, so we'd have plenty of time to make the drive and get settled before the pitchers and catchers start. We can even celebrate Valentine's Day there if we leave today."

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Pitchers and catchers and Valentine's Day? Suntan lotion?

Oh, god. Harry thinks he knows what's going on in her mind. Spring training, 1947. St. Pete. The career that never was.

In 1939, Harry Mack had the lowest ERA in the International League — 2.12. He won twenty-four games for the Redwings, seventeen more in Havana during winter ball.

Harry, at twenty years old, was on his way.

In the summer of 1946, coming home, Harry, at twenty-seven, didn't have it. Oh, his arm strength was fine. He spent a few months pitching in a gym, and the ball felt good, moved a lot. But he didn't know if baseball made any sense to him anymore.

Still, he drove down to St. Petersburg with Edna in February of 1947. Drove down in the brand new Buick her Dad had bought them, all white walls and fancy. Got there in time for Valentine's Day with his new bride.

Sam Breaden, the Cardinals owner, had offered him a try-out, just to do the right thing by a veteran, a guy who was promising before the war. But Harry realized, when he was there, that he didn't have it, knew he'd have to find something else for life, and so, despite having made the drive, he never went onto the field for the tryout. He stood outside the field down there by the waterfront in St. Pete and watched the fellows loosen up while the pelicans dive-bombed the fish out in the harbor.

Bad enough, that bomb. But the next day, sitting in his tent, hung over from the celebrations the night before, Harry saw Death.

A Jap sapper, a guy who'd been hiding in the jungle for six months, came in with a sword a mile long, slashing and stabbing. Jimmy Hedick got it in the gut, but lived. Captain Anderson, walking by, almost had his head lopped off. He lived, gurgling, for the longest minute of Harry's life, looking up at his flight engineer, eyes wide with terror and then nothing, that stare.

The Jap came up to Harry next. Looked at Harry. Sat down, cross-legged, took out another, shorter blade, and disemboweled himself.

Harry was untouched, in most ways.

Two years later, standing there watching the guys get loose, even hearing the crack of the bat and the satisfying smack of the ball into leather, he just couldn't see himself doing that anymore. That was his past, somehow, and now he was grown up. Others did okay, Musial was

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out there, and Slaughter, and Moore. Garagiola waved at Harry, told him to get his spikes on and get on out there.

But Harry could only shake his head. It just wasn't there. He drove back to the hotel, handed Edna her Valentine's Day card, got hers in return, and then told her to pack, they were going home, back to Texas in the new Buick. Her Dad had a job lined up for him. A good job, at the dealership.

There were a lot of dreams ended by that damn war. A lot of them, millions. Harry's was no big deal, he'd gotten over it a long, long time ago.

And now this, with Edna. She's all the way back there, remembering, living. Ready to go.

Still, no reason not to humor her a bit, poor Eddie. She'd probably forget all about it in a few minutes anyway.

He walks over to the coat rack, grabs her favorite old wool overcoat.

"Sure, Eddie, I remembered," he says. "Let's go, honey. It's a long drive."

"Oh, well. I wondered, Harry. You know how you are, dear. So forgetful sometimes."

She slips easily into the coat, too easily, all that lost weight. She takes his hand and pulls him toward the front door of the place. "Oh, Harry, I've been looking forward to this day for weeks. Come on, we can at least make it to Paducah by tonight, don't you think?"

"Sure, Edna," he says. "Sure. Paducah."

A quarter hour later, Edna is quiet as they drive through the residential streets toward Interstate 44. Harry begins to think she's forgotten the spring training thing already. Maybe, he figures, he'll just take her to the Art Museum in Forest Park. She'll like that.

He looks at her as they drive down Berry Road. So innocent, so sweet. This terrible thing that has happened to her has returned her to her childhood.

She notices his glance.

"You keep your eyes on the road, Harry Mack, and not on your bride," she says, laughing. "These roads are slick enough without you staring over at me instead of paying attention."

She straightens herself up in the seat, looks out the front window. "I love this car," she says. "I know you don't like that Dad bought it for us,

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Harry. But it's his dealership, so it didn't cost him anything, really, and he wanted so much to do something nice for us."

Harry takes a breath. So it's not over yet. He looks straight ahead down the road, says, "Well, you know I wanted us to get one on our own, Eddie, but god knows it would have been tough. And it *is* a great car."

Playing along with her little fantasy, he adds, "The Post said it's in the eighties today in St. Pete."

"Doesn't that sound wonderful, Harry? The sun. After all this gray winter. Those beautiful beaches. And maybe we can visit Silver Springs this year," she says.

"Sure. Silver Springs. And Weeki-Watchee, and the Sunken Gardens. All of them, Eddie, all of them."

"We can use the sunshine, Harry. I'm tired of all this gray," she says, and then falls silent.

He nods. He, too, is tired of all the gray.

HARRY ISN'T sure why, but he decides not to get on the interstate, and instead drives on down Berry to Gravois, old Route 66. He goes east on that, and figures by the time they cross the Mississippi and get into Illinois she'll be over this thing and maybe they can get a bite to eat over there somewhere and then head home.

But Edna doesn't get over it. Instead, they take the old Eads bridge across the river, ignore I-64, and get on Illinois Route 142, the two-lane road over to Mt. Vernon. Somewhere on that road, maybe around Freeburg, Harry realizes he's passed the point of no return. As long as Edna is going to be like this he is going to play along.

It is, by any accounts, the happiest he's seen her in years, decades maybe. All the pain, the bad times, moving from city to city with different jobs, losing little Tommy in that Asian war, the stupid things Harry's done, the ways he's hurt her, the cheating, the hard drinking, all of that, to her, has never happened, might never happen, is all up ahead in the future somewhere.

God, he wishes there were some way to reach her just long enough to get some forgiveness for it all. That's what hurts the most, how she slipped away on him before he could really talk it out with her, admit what a

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monster he'd been in so many ways over the years, tell her how sorry he was. If he had it to do over, things would be different, a lot better.

By supper time they are at the Ohio, taking the Shawneetown ferry across the river into Kentucky, where they pick up U.S. 41. That road will take them all the way to St. Pete, and the sunshine.

Harry feels good in the Buick, likes the smell of it, the feel, the big steering wheel with "Buick Eight" written across it and the fancy Sonamatic radio and the jump seats in the back. Gauges everywhere, oil pressure and battery, the works.

It's a hell of a car, painted sky blue, like they were flying, he and Edna, flying south out of the cold and rain and gray and finding Florida, some better past down there.

They decide to spend the night in Clarksville, at the old Clarksville Hotel. Harry knows the place was torn down in the late 1950s, but chooses not to worry about it as they check in.

Registering at the front desk, chatting with the bellboy and the elevator operator as they take their bags up the elevator with them, it all seems so damn normal that he just doesn't even want to think about how it all has come to pass.

Truth is, he thinks, he even feels better physically. Stronger, younger. He takes a look in the bathroom mirror as they are getting settled in the room, and can't see much difference, but, god, he feels good.

Maybe it is Edna, rubbing off on him. She is as alive, as bright as he's seen her in years. That, alone, makes this whole madcap thing worthwhile. Just seeing her like this is what makes him feel so much better.

They eat dinner in the hotel restaurant. Prime rib. The whole meal is under five dollars, including the glass of wine for Edna. Harry doesn't drink anymore, of course, not since the big blowup twenty years ago — damn, he almost lost everything then, his job, Edna, the house. And all for the booze. But, like everything else, they got through it. He got dried out, hasn't touched the stuff since. No reason she can't, though, especially under the circumstances.

After dinner they go for a walk to buy a few things. Harry also sees this as a chance to find out just how weird things are, to check his own sanity, in a way.

For the first few blocks he could swear they were back in the forties.

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They stop in one place and buy a nice little suitcase. It costs seven dollars. Another place sells them some underwear and socks, a few shirts, two dresses. It adds up to about twenty dollars all told.

There are ads everywhere for DeSotos and Frigidaire refrigerators and Maytag washing machines. The boys are home and business is booming.

Then, as they're walking, Edna grips Harry's hand, hard, and stumbles.

"Oh, Harry," she says, and as he looks at her he sees in her eyes that Edna, his Edna, has fought through the fog for a moment and it's Now.

"Where are we?" she says. And he's about to tell her when she opens her purse and starts rummaging around in there.

A few feet away there's a homeless guy sitting there, with a hand-lettered sign propped in front of him that reads "Homeless Vietnam vet. Please help me buy a meal."

Harry ignores the guy. There are so many these days, and most of them are probably not vets at all, just in it for the easy money. Edna, though, fishes in her purse for some coins, and tosses the guy a handful of quarters.

He nods at the loud clink, says, "Thank you, ma'am. I forgive you."

Harry almost has to pull Edna away before she gives him even more money, and when he finally gets her moving in the right direction the moment of clarity, that brief return to Now, is gone.

"With your contract money we can buy a 'fridge, Harry," Edna says, looking at the signs. The war is over and the appliances are back, Harry thinks. And he can only shake his head. It's 1947.

They wind their way back to the hotel, and Edna greets the bellboy warmly, says hello to the desk clerk, strides happily toward the elevator.

An hour later, as they lie in the big bed together, on their backs, holding hands, Harry tries to figure out what's going on, but there aren't any answers except that somehow she's forcing herself back to a better past and him along with her.

As long as he stays with her, Harry decides, everything will be all right. He'll take care of her, no matter how crazy it gets, until things get back to normal. Then he wonders if things will get back to normal. How long will this last? It could end anytime. It could last forever. Or maybe, he thinks, in the morning it will be Now again.

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He is almost asleep when Edna, in a voice he hasn't heard in years, says, "Harry. Aren't you going to, you know...?"

He looks at her, smiles.

"Harry. I'm so glad we're together," she says. "There were times I thought you'd never make it home, and that scared me so. And now here you are, and we're together. And the future looks so bright!" She reaches over and hugs him, hard.

And they make love. Like the old, old days, they make love. After, Harry, exhausted, falls asleep with Edna in his arms.

In the morning, things aren't changed, it's still the forties. And Harry has to admit to feeling comfortable with it all as he picks up the suitcase with their new clothes and places it into the deep trunk of the Buick.

They are on the road by seven, Harry driving through the confusion of Nashville and then, a couple of hours later, over the high pass at Monteagle, downshifting twice to get up the narrow, cliff-hugging road, and then waiting patiently behind a big semitrailer on the way down the other side. Edna is reading the Burma Shave signs out loud, and laughing at the best of them.

"Listen to this, Harry," she says about one of them: "'The chick/He wed/Let out a whoop/Felt his chin and/Flew the coop.' Isn't that delightful?"

And then, later, she recites another: "Spring has sprung/The grass has riz/Where last year's/Careless driver is. Burma Shave."

She says that, then sits back in her seat with a smile. Spring, indeed, thinks Harry. A whole new season.

They stop for gas at a little gas station in South Pittsburg, waiting patiently for the attendant to clean the windshield and check the oil, and then, as they pull back on 41, there is a hitchhiker there, a young guy, maybe twenty, with a sign that reads "Tampa" on it.

Harry hasn't picked up a hitchhiker in fifteen or twenty years, it has all gotten too dangerous for that. But Edna insists.

"He looks like a nice, clean-cut young man, Harry. And he's cold there, standing out in the weather," she says.

Harry, fully committed now to whatever folly she chooses, silently pulls the Buick over and waits for the guy to jog up to them, open the right-side door, and scramble in behind Edna.

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"Wow, man. This is a great fucking car," he says, settling in, and Harry cringes at the language, but Edna seems not to notice. "Where'd you get it?" the guy asks. "Jesus, it's in great shape."

"It ought to be, it's brand new," Edna says firmly.

"Yeah," the guy says, smiling, "Sure. Brand new. Well, hell, it's really something," he says again, and then, leaning forward, he adds. "Thanks for the lift. I'm heading down to Tampa to see my sister."

"Well, you're in luck, young man," Edna says, turning to smile at him. "We're on our way to St. Petersburg for spring training. My husband is a ballplayer, you know, and we're driving right through Tampa on our way, aren't we Harry?"

Poor Edna. Harry can only nod his head.

"You're a ballplayer, huh?" asks the kid, looking at Harry. Harry, watching the rear view mirror, can see the guy assessing him.

"Yeah," the guy says. "You look like a ballplayer. Got the right build for it. Anyway, thanks for picking me up. 'Preciate it." And he sits back, quiet for the moment.

Harry looks at his face in the mirror and, at first, can see no differences — he is still the same old, overweight Harry Mack that he's been for a long time now. The lines on his face, the gray hair (but still a full head of hair, damn it!) , the too-large nose, swollen now from those past years of drinking — they are all the same, no matter how good he feels, no matter what the hitchhiker says, or Edna thinks.

Then, as he is about to look away, he thinks he sees, maybe there, in the background, hazy and indistinct, the faint image of another Harry, a younger one, smiling, happy, the future ahead of him.

They stop for lunch in Calhoun, Georgia. The hitchhiker, to his credit, insists on paying for his own meal, and seems unfazed that his hamburger, fries, and Coke cost him a little under a dollar.

Later, as they work their way through Atlanta and then dive down into southern Georgia, Edna, who's been quiet for miles, turns sideways in her seat and starts talking to the guy they've picked up.

"Harry fought in the Pacific," she says. "Flew those big bombers. We met in San Antonio where he was for training."

"That's nice," the guy says, Harry listening to this with interest. What will the guy do when he figures out how crazy all this is?

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"I fought in the Pacific, too. A few years ago. In 'Nam."

"'Nam?"

"Yeah. You know, Vietnam. Jesus, you know, the whole 'Nam thing. First Air Cav. Nasty shit."

Edna ignores the language. Later, she'll tell Harry she knows that men pick up bad habits with their language when they're in the Army. "You a pilot?" he asks Harry.

"Flight engineer," Harry says. "Flew out of Guam most of the time. Later, out of Okinawa."

"Oh, man, there were some times we were glad to see you guys," the guy says. "One time, in Quang Trai, you guys saved my butt completely, man. No shit. Completely. We were going to be overrun in another hour, but then you guys came over and that, man, was that. Jesus, what a show that was, some kind of fireworks, craters twenty yards across."

Harry nods. "I hear it was tough over there, son, real tough." He thinks about whether or not to mention the next thing, then does. "We lost a boy over there, during Tet. A fine young man."

Edna looks at Harry, puzzled. Then, for a few moments, it all clicks for her, she's in the here and not in the past, just for those few moments, and she says, dreamily, "Yes. Our boy Tommy. Flew a helicopter. Our wonderful boy, Tommy."

It was Harry who convinced Tommy to go do his duty, like Harry had done his. The boy had actually been talking about Canada, imagine that. But Harry had convinced him otherwise.

Like old glass the whole world bleeds and shifts. The Buick, the scenery outside, it all starts to run, gets vague and unclear, like he's in the new Olds and the old Buick at once, like they're on I-75 not old 41, like it's the Now and not the Then.

Then Edna brightens, forgets the sadness, adds, "Harry was flying over Japan the day they dropped the Bomb, isn't that so, Harry?"

And the Buick is firm, the Then solidifies. Harry nods.

"Yeah. Saw it in the distance. Hell of a sight."

"Oh, Harry. Please," says Edna.

"Well, Eddie, it was a hell of a sight."

"Yeah," says the guy, "I bet it was at that." And then he sits back, quiet.

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Harry and Edna call it a day in Valdosta, and the guy decides to keep hitching, in the darkness. There are best wishes all around and then, in the old Valdosta Inn, Harry and Edna eat a nice supper, go for a stroll through the Spanish moss-draped old oak trees that line Main Street, and then, back in their room, make love again.

The next morning, they're in Florida by seven, and approaching St. Petersburg by early afternoon. They haven't said much for most of the day. Driving past Silver Springs, Edna mentions that she'd like to come back up this way while they're here, and Harry agrees. They do the same with Weeki-Watchee, and Tarpon Springs.

And then, after a light lunch at a roadside diner in Clearwater, they angle over to Gulf Boulevard and drive down the coast.

On their right, the Gulf sparkles in the warm breeze. There are little bungalows dotted along in the dunes, and in Indian Rocks they see a "For Rent" sign in front of a little group of four or five places like that.

They pull into the sandy parking lot, and the rate is forty dollars a week.

The place is a tidy little one-bedroom home, with a nice kitchen, a little living room, a screened-in front porch with the damnedest view in the world of the Gulf and the pelicans. The sunsets are going to be great.

It's only three o'clock by then, but Harry's tired and says he wants to rest.

"I won't hear of it, Harry Mack," Edna says. "You've been talking about this for months. Let's get right over there and see what Mr. Breaden has in mind for you."

And so they climb back into the Buick and drive over to Al Lang.

Harry is terrified. Where will this end?

But there they are, in the old parking lot on First Avenue North. And damned if some of the guys aren't out there, loosening up. There's Stan, and Enos, and Joe. Garagiola waves at him, yells at him to get those spikes on and get warmed up.

And there, leaning on the wooden fence, is Sam Breaden. Edna gets out of the Buick, waves and shouts at him, "Mr. Breaden! Mr. Breaden!"

And damned if Breaden doesn't wave back, shout out her name, and come over to chat with them.

Harry climbs out, too.

"Hello, Mr. Breaden," he says.

"Harry. Glad to have you here, boy. And a couple of days early, too.

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Well, no problem. Let's get you in and get you some equipment. Feel like loosening up a bit today, just to get a feel for things? Then, tonight, let me take you and your beautiful wife out to dinner. That sound all right?"

Harry laughs. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely, absolutely. I've heard good things about you, son. Ted Williams said he hit against you in a game over on Guam or somewhere, and you struck the son-of-a-gun out. We can use someone who can get hitters as good as that Williams kid out, I'll tell you that.

"C'mon, son. As long as you're here, let's get you started," Breaden says, and steers him by the elbow.

Harry smiles and waves at Edna as he and Breaden walk over to the clubhouse door. Edna takes a seat in the rickety old bleachers that sit behind the batting screen.

She's relaxing maybe fifteen minutes later when Harry walks out. He's got the flannels on, and some new spikes, a good Wilson glove, that Cardinal cap. It's her Harry, her major leaguer.

He walks over to her.

"I'm really here, Edna. It's me. I'm really here."

He has tears in his eyes. He *is* really there. Inside the clubhouse he stood in front of the mirror and saw himself at twenty-seven. Lithe. Strong. Behind that image, faint and ghostly, was the real Harry, old, tired, worn down by bad decisions, a few wrong turns.

But now, here, god he feels good.

"Of course you're here, Harry," Edna says. "We're both here." And then, as he starts to turn to jog toward the bullpen where he'll loosen up, she adds, "I forgive you, Harry."

And he turns back to look at her, his beautiful young bride sitting there, and shakes his head. Forgiveness. Maybe that's what this is all about. And second chances. For Harry, for Edna.

Will it last past today? Tomorrow is Valentine's Day, will they still be here, in this better past, starting over? He doesn't know, but then he thinks maybe that it doesn't matter, really. It's here. He's here. Now.

He starts to cry, he loves her so. It will be better this time. "Oh, Edna," he says, "Oh, Eddie, thank you, thank you so much."

"Go now, you big lug," she says, wiping his eyes with her handkerchief.

And he does, out to the bullpen, where Garagiola waits to warm him up.

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Since Mary Soon Lee's first F&SF *story appeared in our May, 1995 issue, she has published several other stories in magazines from* Interzone *to* On Spec. *She has also sold us several more stories, of which "Universal Grammar" is the first.*

She writes, "I often find it hard to identify where the ideas for my stories come from, but in this case I can pinpoint at least one source. After years of meaning to read Noam Chomsky's book, Language and Problems of Knowledge, *I finally did so, and found it fascinating. The first draft of 'Universal Grammar' was completed one day after I finished Chomsky's book."*

The influences are clear, but the story takes us into a world all its own.

Universal Grammar

By Mary Soon Lee

AS SOON AS I SAW THE pictures of the latest aliens sliming inside their tank, I knew two things. One: I didn't want to go anywhere near those creatures. Two: the department would make me do so.

I turned my back on the pub's news-cube and swallowed the rest of my vodka in a burning gulp. The aliens reminded me of the octopus I'd run into one day at the seaside. At six years old, I'd taken a good look at the octopus with its corpse-white suckers opening and closing like a hundred blind mouths, and then I had run screaming up to the hotel.

Well, that was a long time ago. I'm thirty-three now and I have an image to maintain: Janna Suzorsky, woman of the world, undaunted by anything or anyone that comes my way, aliens included. But the hair was standing up on the back of my arms, and I had to struggle to maintain a calm expression.

The first alien visitors arrived in 2039. I was finishing my doctorate, certain that the aliens would have more sense than my own people,

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desperate to meet them. But the aliens didn't come to the USA, let alone Harvard. Instead they announced in flawless Parisian French that they wanted to take photographs of the Eiffel Tower. A day later, they were gone and we hadn't learned one word of their language.

Since then, Earth has had interstellar visitors an average of once every two years; the octopus creatures were our eighth alien species. The others arrived speaking perfect Spanish, or Swahili, or Texas drawl. The closest anyone got to learning their own languages was when I deduced some simple word elements from the gestural vocabulary of the Eridanians. As soon as the Eridanians realized I'd understood some of their remarks, they stopped gesturing and talked to one another in Mandarin Chinese. When it came right down to it, none of the aliens had given us any more than a field day for the media and a huge boost to military budgets. Not one new antibiotic, or metal alloy, or even a glimpse of the interior of their spaceships.

In the background I heard the newscaster getting more and more excited. So far the octopus aliens hadn't said a word in any human language. A UN official expressed cautious optimism that these aliens didn't understand us. Maybe they'd be willing to teach us their language as we taught them ours. Maybe.

My curiosity was beginning to conquer my dislike for all things slimy and tentacled. Catching Billy the bartender's eye, I held up two fingers for another double shot of vodka. If the truth be known, I've never much liked the flavor of alcohol, but my DNA chart shows no predisposition to alcoholism and liquor has its uses. By the time I was halfway through my second vodka, I was calm enough to swivel back toward the news-cube.

The seven aliens had docked at the Principia geosynchronous orbital station at 06:15 that morning. They'd sent an unintelligible message on the UN military channel three weeks earlier, and the Security Council had been tracking their ship ever since. Not that the Council had deigned to tell the rest of us until the last possible moment. So there the aliens were, tentacles gesticulating wildly behind the smoky blue walls of their tank.

Trying to communicate.

At least, that's what everyone hoped, myself included. I sat there at the bar, outwardly composed, but my heartbeat sang loud in my ears. I

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made myself watch the motions of the aliens, every ripple of their tentacles, the pattern in which their suckers opened and closed. Once the newscast switched away from the creatures to show Holman, my boss. Holman smiled his boyish grin, complete with a goddamn perfect dimple, as he murmured techno-speak for the cameras: language semantics, binding theory, the difficulties of inferring non-phonetic trace elements.

From the way the veins stood out on the backs of his hands, I could tell that Holman was stalling. He had no more idea what the aliens were saying than the cameramen did. But caught between the media-glare, the pressure from the military types, and his own ego, he hadn't yet admitted to himself that he was stumped.

I estimated it would take him two more hours to realize that. And another hour to persuade himself to call me. I almost felt sorry for him. After all, it must be humiliating to ask assistance from a junior member of the department. Especially when she's publicly refused three dates and instead spends her time in some run-down pub in the East End of London.

I ran my finger along the counter, leaving a smeary track through the ringed imprints of glasses. This must once have been an exclusive establishment. The walls were wainscoted in English oak, the windows fitted with antique stained glass. But now the carpet was threadbare, the smell of cigarettes soaked decades-deep into the yellowed walls. There were only four customers, myself and three seedy characters playing poker at a corner table.

Billy the bartender muted the newscast and leaned on the counter opposite me. "Wasn't that your boss on the news?"

I nodded, scowling a little. Billy never quizzes me about my job and The Aliens, which is one of the reasons I keep coming to his pub. Unfortunately he doesn't show the same restraint on the subject of Holman.

"I hear he's been given another honorary degree," said Billy.

I nodded again. Billy stared at me expectantly, but I wasn't going to help him with this particular conversation. Holman had milked every last drop of academic credit from our joint study of the Eridanian gestural vocabulary. To be fair, he'd wanted to list me as senior author, but I declined. The bulk of the analysis was his. After the Eridanians switched to speaking Chinese my enthusiasm dwindled; I continued to analyze the

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earlier tapes, trying to interpret more of their gestures, but it reminded me of studying Latin, or Sumerian, or any other dead language that no one but academics will ever speak.

I gazed at the muted news-cube. Two of the octopus creatures brushed tentacles with each other, a slow, languid touch. I waited for the camera to pull back and show the others: how did they react? Was touching commonplace or significant? But the camera cut to the vacuous smirk of a journalist and then to the adverts.

Dammit, how long was Holman going to take before he called me? The man had a knack for being perfectly infuriating without doing anything I could actually object to. The day before, at the end of a department meeting, he had asked us all to join him for some relaxation. His dimpled smile had been Innocence itself. But I knew that he knew the others were busy, and I wasn't about to agree to an evening alone for two.

I had declined his offer with chilly politeness, and only then had Holman played his trump card. "A pity," he said, his rich deep voice drawing out each syllable, "I had tickets for the opening performance of *Pride and Prejudice.*"

I'd been trying to get tickets for the premiere for weeks. If it had been anyone else I'd have asked to accept the invitation after all. But I could see from Holman's smirk that he was waiting for me to do exactly that.

As I sat in the pub I was partway to believing that he'd planned this too: picked a weekend when I'd made it clear I was otherwise engaged, and then arranged for the most intriguing alien contact to date. All right, so that was going too far, but why hadn't the man phoned me by now?

I badly needed a distraction. I stood up and crossed over to the poker game.

Big Al grinned at me. "You look like you got some cash burning holes in your pockets."

"Maybe." I took a seat on Lara's right, laid a fold of bills down on the worn green felt.

Lara riffle-shuffled the cards, and pushed them to me to cut, the light reflecting from her long red fingernails. Beside Lara, I feel like a flat-chested teenager. At nights, when the pub fills up, she plays the role of a licensed hooker who's relaxing on her night off. I don't know what her real

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job is, but I'd guess something much drier, an accountant or an insurance underwriter.

I pushed the deck back to Lara. "What's the game?"

Flicking her blonde ponytail over her shoulder, Lara dealt the cards out, keeping them low to the table. "Five card stud, nothing wild."

We played stud poker and draw poker, brag and blackjack. The pile of money in front of me swelled and dwindled and grew again. After four hours, I was ahead by a few dollars and Big Al was up considerably more. Lara looked resigned and Marcos looked gloomy.

And Holman hadn't called.

When I couldn't keep my mind on the game, I stood up and gave my place to a man I didn't recognize. I didn't want to go back to my apartment, and I was in no mood for hitting the town. So I went upstairs to the login booths. My usual booth was free. I slipped in my credit chip and shut the door behind me.

Billy hasn't paid for the fancy VR upgrades, but his booths are soundproof and the datalinks are secure. I linked in to the department's system and called up the files on the octopus aliens. They leapt into view on the cube: seven sets of tentacles waving in front of me with crystal clarity. I shifted further back in my chair.

My security clearance gave me access to most of the files. Twenty-three minutes after the alien ship had docked at Principia, their airlock cycled open and the aliens came out in their tank. The airlock had cycled open once every 2.8 hours since then. Each time it stayed open exactly 29.3 seconds, but nothing had come out except that first tank. The tank itself was a sealed prism about four meters long by two meters tall; ignoring the nominal floor and ceiling marked out in Principia's microgravity environment, the tank glided along the walls before settling in a doorway.

The military were sticking to their usual hands-off policy; no invasive scans of the aliens, nor of their ship, nor of their equipment. The policy might or might not explain why none of the alien species had yet attacked us, but it left us with very few hard facts.

The physicists couldn't determine whether the ship possessed a faster than light drive, nor what weaponry it had, if any. The biologists had detailed the apparent similarities and differences between the aliens and

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Earth marine creatures, but most of their report was speculation. The aliens floated behind those smoky blue walls, apparently silent, though the biologists wouldn't rule out the possibility of a vocal component stopped by the tank's wall.

Twice in the last five hours the tank had spontaneously glided along the walls of Principia to a new resting place. The engineers hadn't figured out how the aliens controlled those movements; there were no obvious links from the tank's interior to any steering system. Maybe the tank responded to the creatures' movements.

I flicked past the reports and replayed the videos of the aliens themselves. It didn't take long before I had a full scale headache. There were so many separate motions to consider. They might be communicating by the position of their tentacles, or the changing rhythms in which their maggot-gray suckers opened and closed, or by the undulating shape of one particular sucker, or by scent-coded messages sprayed into the water.

I programmed the computer to try to find correlations between the creatures' behavior and the stimuli being provided by Holman and the others. Holman showed the aliens elementary mathematical sequences, diagrams of the periodic table, star charts, geometrical shapes, pictures of Earth fauna and flora.

Occasionally the aliens appeared to be watching him, but I couldn't pick out any clear response. Surely they must have at least understood numerical sequences such as prime numbers: why didn't they reply? Because we insulted them by choosing something so basic? Because Holman himself had somehow offended them? Or maybe they had signaled an answer, and we were too obtuse to decipher it.

A priori, we have no reason to assume that an alien language will be intelligible to us. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Chomsky and other linguists began to deduce the human language faculty. Contrary to earlier assumptions, human infants don't learn language from first principles. Instead part of their brain is already geared up to decrypt human-style language. On a deep structural level, Chinese and Bengali and Latin all follow the same underlying rules for handling nouns and verbs, for using trace elements and binding anaphora. This complex system is available to us subconsciously from our innate language faculty. Infants

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must learn the particular vocabulary and local rules from their environment, but the deeper rules of how to process language are already in place.

An alien language, however, would be expected to have a different structure, one which our brains aren't adapted to process. So, unlike a human language, we would never be able to master the alien tongue to the point where our understanding of it happened immediately and subconsciously. Nonetheless, with the aid of computers and logical inference — and some cooperative aliens — we might be able to deduce the rules of the language. And then we could consciously interpret it in the same mechanical way that we can decode a mathematically encrypted message.

The previous sets of aliens, the ones who spoke our languages perfectly, had presumably first studied our TV and radio broadcasts. Having deduced the rules of our languages, they could have coded them onto some kind of translator implant to use when speaking to us.

That was the theory anyhow. Yet as I sat in the booth, trying to spot meaningful patterns and symmetries in the aliens' behavior, I didn't make any progress at all. I wasn't even sure which movements were genuine language signals and which were random noise.

When it got to nine in the evening, I went down to the bar and grabbed a chicken sandwich and three aspirin. Billy nodded at the news-cube as the camera zoomed in on Holman's face. Holman's grin looked a little more strained, and there were faint shadows under his eyes, but the bastard still hadn't phoned me.

"According to Reuters," said Billy, "your boss's been studying the aliens for fourteen hours straight. I respect that. Most people are too busy enjoying themselves to hold a regular job, let alone to really work at it."

Sometimes Billy sounds like a pensioner harping on the good old days, though he can't be more than forty-five. "Holman enjoys his work," I mumbled, my mouth half-full of sandwich. "And he especially enjoys all the attention that comes from it."

"Maybe, maybe not, but once he figures out what those octopus things are saying, he'll have more attention than he knows what to do with."

"*If* he figures out what they're saying."

Billy smiled. "I bet he's halfway there already."

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I would have made a skeptical remark, but Billy had moved on to another customer. I chewed the rest of my sandwich automatically, my appetite gone. Waiting for Holman to finally ask me for help was bad enough. Thinking that he might solve this without me brought back my headache.

I stalked upstairs to the booth, and placed a call to Holman. It took six full minutes before he deigned to wander over to a privacy hood and speak to me. When his face finally appeared in the cube, I realized I hadn't planned what to say. Deciding on the casual approach, I said, "How's it going?"

"Janna, I'm busy. Is there something you need?"

"Not at all. I thought you might want some assistance; I could catch the next clipper up to Principia — "

Holman shook his head. "This area of the station's been secured. I've been asked to keep my staff down to a minimum. Besides, you made it obvious enough that you were busy this weekend. So, if there's nothing wrong at your end?" His deep voice rose slightly in question. Holman has the most expressive voice I know. If it weren't for the way we end up yelling at each other, I could listen to him for hours.

"No, nothing's wrong — "

"Good."

He closed the connection.

I glared at the CALL TERMINATED sign flashing in the center of the cube. There were probably two dozen scientists, a squad of UN soldiers, three camera crews, and twenty politicians all up there with the aliens. Yet Holman had all but ordered me to stay away.

Well, fine then. I called up the files on the aliens again. Painstakingly, I repeated my analysis, this time searching with the computer for paired movements that might combine to form a single word element.

Somehow I was approaching this incorrectly. That had been the problem with the Eridanians. We'd been so busy speculating about the high-pitched clicks they periodically made that we ignored their gestures. Now the biologists conjectured that the clicks had been a mere animal process, say like our stomachs rumbling when we're hungry.

I glanced at the clock: 11:15 P.M.. Two more hours had disappeared. My animal body was getting tired. A purple cue-button popped up at the

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top of the cube — the aliens' airlock had cycled open again, right on time, but nothing came out. I rubbed at my temples: okay, the airlock opened every 2.8 hours. Why? If not to let something out, then maybe they were waiting for us to put something there. Such as what? Human visitors in exchange for the aliens touring Principia? Only the aliens didn't seem that interested in Principia. The tank moved, but the aliens barely paid attention to their surroundings.

That was it. I leaned forward, my fingers trembling, and quickly ran a search through the few stimuli the aliens seemed to pay attention to: bright colors, rapid movements of large objects.

I called up Holman.

He answered almost at once, his face snapping into view in the middle of the cube. Stubble dotted the clean lines of his chin.

"Janna." Tiredness seeped into his voice, deepening it further. "I'm sorry; I intended to call you back. Have you had time to examine the recordings?"

"Yes — and you're trying to talk to the wrong aliens. The octopuses are just animals — maybe presented to us as some kind of test, or ritual exchange, or — "

"Perhaps you'd better begin at the beginning."

I took a deep breath. "Okay. It only occurred to me a few minutes ago, but I'm pretty certain that the octopuses aren't intelligent. Try running a series of stimulus response tests on them, and I'll give you three to one odds they'll only react to simple visual cues. They haven't responded to complex signals such as prime numbers, because they don't understand them any more than a chimpanzee does."

"One second." Frowning, Holman turned away from the phone pickup. I heard the faint echo of his voice speaking to someone out of my sight. He disappeared for a minute, and then his face swung back in place. He gave me his best dimpled grin. "It appears you could be right, Dr. Suzorsky. Any other conjectures you wish to share?"

"Not really, only that if there are any sentient aliens still inside the ship, they might be sitting there waiting for us to give them something in exchange for the octopuses."

"Which is why their airlock cycles open periodically? Possibly." Holman turned away again and swung back a moment later. "Can you be

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at the Cape in three hours? There's a military shuttle taking off for Principia."

"I'll be there."

HOLMAN MET ME when I stepped out of the shuttle and onto Principia geosynchronous orbital station. I'd been to the Lunar colonies several times and once to a low Earth orbit station, but I'd never before boosted on a military shuttle. My legs were jelly. If I hadn't already lost my dinner on the short flight, I'd have lost it over Holman.

"Rough trip?" said Holman, grinning.

I wanted to kick him, but I was still adjusting to being in a microgravity environment. By the time my foot was aimed to kick, Holman was partway down the corridor.

"Hurry up. You were right about the octopuses being non-sentient."

Cautiously, I pushed my magnetic boots away from the broad metal ribbon of the beginners' pathway, and propelled myself along after Holman.

He waited impatiently for me to catch up. "We're not sure yet whether the octopuses were meant as a gift, or a test, or a trade. We put a tank of fish into the airlock last time it cycled open, together with a sheet of mathematical sequences and a map of the solar system."

"Any response?"

"Not yet. But if they keep to their previous schedule, the airlock will open again in nine minutes."

Holman hurried us past the military checkpoints, slowing only as we approached the secondary docking area. The curved windows showed a mass of jewel-bright stars, their blue and red and yellow shades a thousand times clearer than on Earth. Against this backdrop hung the cylindrical structure of the alien ship, bathed in the station's floodlights. Odd protrusions prickled from every surface of the main cylinder — thin metallic rods, cobwebs of rust-colored strands, rounded bumps. From one end a short tube flexed across to the station's docking port. It was the ugliest, strangest, most fascinating object I'd ever seen.

Holman caught me by the arm and stopped me by a line on the floor. A group of other people clustered behind the line. Off to one side stood five soldiers, their spines ramrod straight. At least their guns were holstered.

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With a faint sigh, the airlock door opened. Two tall figures stepped forward, their bodies hidden in pale orange spacesuits. But I could make out their heads through the smoky blue of their face plates. Three insectile compound eyes stared back at us from each face, the eyes spaced evenly around a mobile white orifice — mouth, or nose, or something else.

A lump bulged from the side of one of the spacesuits, and the alien held out a sheet covered in jagged symbols. A tinny sound resonated in the air, like rain dancing on a metal roof.

Holman's hand pushed me forward, and then I was standing a meter in front of the alien, tilting my head to stare at its face.

"Hello." I took the sheet of symbols from the alien, the texture rougher than paper between my fingers. The alien's eyes glinted at me. For a moment my throat was too full to speak. "Thank you, thank you very much. We're very happy to welcome you to Earth."

The alien said something in that patter of tinny sounds. It subsided downwards, the suit belling outward, and crouched on the magnetic strip in the floor. The other alien crouched down beside it.

Alien number two laid down a metal tray, and pushed a round blue disk into the center of the tray. "Tt-si," it said. It added a second disk. "Tt-siyt."

I squatted down on the floor and pointed first at one disk then the other, my fingers shaking. "One. Two."

"You realize," said Holman dryly as he settled down beside me, "that they might be saying 'round,' 'blue,' 'metal,' or just 'hello.' If those are even words at all."

"Pessimist," I muttered.

Alien number one's spacesuit bulged, and it deposited a third blue disk. "Tt-miyt.... Tt-si, tt-siyt, tt-miyt."

"Three," said Holman. "One, two, three."

The muscles round my mouth felt strange. It was only when I glanced over to Holman and saw his broad grin that I realized I was beaming like a baby.

That first day we covered some rudimentary vocabulary, numbers, mathematical terms, the names of chemical elements. And each other's names. The aliens were, to my ear, "Tmisi," and "Sirit." There's a lot of

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extra detail carried at frequencies just above the human auditory range. Tmisi was the more talkative of the pair and fidgeted more.

On the second day, we progressed to simple sentences — "A Tsiliit has three eyes; a human has two eyes" — enough to realize that the underlying structure of the language the aliens were teaching us was very similar to our own.

On day three, several terrestrial academics announced that they had suspected such language similarities for years. Just as there is a single theory that captures the essential properties of arithmetic, the academics claimed that the human language faculty captures the most economical way to structure complex thoughts, from the hierarchical use of nested clauses to the splitting of words into noun-verb categories.

The next day, having cleared it with the military, Holman brought out tapes of our earlier alien visitors. Sirit took one look as we played the first tape, then folded its head down against its body, eyes hidden.

"What did I do? Did I upset you?" Holman switched off the tape, but Sirit stayed tucked over against itself and didn't answer.

Tmisi shrilled the Tsiliit for "I don't understand" followed by a rapid patter of words I didn't recognize.

I stared at Sirit and all I could think was that we'd hurt it somehow. And suddenly the Tsiliit I'd learned seemed useless, touching on nothing that I needed. I knew how to say "The Earth is the third planet orbiting our sun," but I couldn't say "I'm sorry."

I stretched out my hand and brushed the side of its spacesuit, the way I'd seen Sirit and Tmisi brush each other. "I'm sorry," I said in English, and then asked in Tsiliit, "Did seeing the tapes of the aliens cause body-injury to Sirit?"

"No." Sirit raised its head fractionally. "The tapes made me lisiiyr" — a word I didn't understand — "those aliens did not talk to us, did not give anything."

Sirit straightened up. In its tinny accent, it said, "It causes me much ttsiys to talk to you."

"And we are very happy to talk to you." My voice was husky. For some reason I didn't shrug Holman away when he put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed it gently.

Late on day six, I discovered that Tmisi and Sirit were both addicted

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to games. We showed them chess, and backgammon, and Parcheesi. In return, they taught me a game with an unpronounceable name, played with a bundle of short rods that change color when you touch them to each other. The rules of the game vary each time, the two opponents taking it in turns to invent fresh constraints.

The first time I beat Tmisi, it rocked back and forth, repeating, "You won," in English and Tsiliit. It nudged each short rod in turn until they changed to a glowing blue-green, then presented me with the bundle of rods. "A gift to you."

"Thank you." I gripped the rods tightly as if it would help me hold onto that moment.

One morning in the second week, Tmisi produced eight tiny machines for our scientists to study. One of our scientists offered a book of airplane schematics, and tried to question Tmisi about the alien machines. Tmisi wriggled, and said that it didn't understand what caused the machines to function. Wriggling a little more, it added, "But I can show you how to use the animals we gave you."

Holman looked up from his discussion with Sirit and stared at Tmisi. "The octopuses have a particular function?"

"Yes, yes," said Tmisi. It followed us to the room where the biologists were studying the octopuses. Much to the biologists' excitement, three of the octopuses had laid foamy yellow clumps of eggs. Trying to look at anything except the octopuses, I gazed at one of the egg clumps as though it fascinated me.

Tmisi's spacesuit bulged and it took out a metallic rod. It pressed the tip against the wall of the tank. The rod glowed for a second, and then protruded into the tank's interior. Tmisi delicately positioned the rod over an egg clump. A transparent sheet extended from the end of the rod, fastened over the eggs, and then Tmisi pulled the assembly out. Tmisi held out the bundle of eggs to Holman.

Holman accepted it gingerly. "How do I use these?"

"Eat them."

Holman nearly dropped the eggs. To his credit, he quickly wiped the look of disgust from his face. "Thank you."

Tmisi added, "They will not cause you injury. Our computer analyzed the human tissue samples that you gave us."

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Holman lifted up an egg between his fingers and placed it in his mouth with grim determination. "Pretty good." He turned to me with an evil smile. "Would you like to try one?"

Maybe I should have considered the diplomatic consequences of insulting a technologically superior species. Maybe I should have eaten the eggs out of common politeness. But it was the thought of Holman's mocking me if I refused that finally decided me. I grabbed an egg, popped it into my mouth and swallowed immediately.

"Delicious," I lied, and headed to the restroom to be discreetly sick. The egg didn't taste bad, just mildly salty, but the knowledge that it came from one of those octopus creatures was too much for my stomach.

On the twenty-third evening of their visit, the aliens left. They kept trying to explain why they had to leave, but that was one of the conversations we never managed to interpret. Holman thinks it may have been something to do with mating rituals; I think Holman was just extrapolating from his own frustrations.

I stood near the docking port, my face pressed against the glass as the aliens prepared to leave. The tube to the airlock unclipped and coiled back up to the ship, and something coiled in my stomach, a hard lump.

"They'll be back," said Holman, "in six hundred and eleven Earth days."

"I know." I was hardly likely to have forgotten. Tmisi had told us so repeatedly. I tried to focus on that. Maybe they'd even come to Earth to visit Billy's pub, and I could teach them poker. There was no reason to feel sad, no reason at all. Three weeks ago, we lived in a universe where the only aliens we knew came and left without volunteering a single fact about themselves. Now I could speak an alien language, and I owned a strange game made of rods of changing colors. A gift from a friend.

The Tsiliit ship pulled away from the station. In one sharp motion it accelerated hugely, a dark blob racing across the field of stars. And then there was nothing. "They'll be back," repeated Holman, and this time it helped, at least a little, to hear his solid confidence. "Are you taking the next clipper downside? There's a restaurant in Tokyo that plays the best jazz music, improbable though that is. We could eat dinner — "

"I'm not hungry."

"Fine." He turned away.

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"London," I said. "In the East End. There's a pub with peeling paintwork and a twenty-four-hour poker game. Do you play?"

He grinned. "Does a duck quack?"

Big Al and Lara and I cleaned him out. What happened later that night is none of your business.

"This charming aria describes a spring morning, as Ariadne opens her French doors and steps outside. The gardener, Korval, approaches her, and with each step his form changes, until he is an undescribable creature from another galaxy. 'Your people,' he thunders, 'must agree to four demands...'"

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Rebecca Ore's work has attracted attention since she first appeared on the scene about ten years ago. Her most recent novel, Gaia, *made the* Locus *Recommended Reading List, and her short fiction is always an event.*

"My Mother, the Alien, and Me" is a different sort of alien story, quieter than most, yet with a power all its own.

My Mother, the Alien, and Me

By Rebecca Ore

WE FOUND THE ALIEN drowning himself in our pond, his face tentacles wrapped around branches of sodden oak. Mother kept talking about some woman who'd left her husband as she went down to see who the body was. I didn't know if she kept chattering to keep me from seeing the drowned man, repelling me with air turbulence, or if she talked from nervousness. I wondered if Dad had come back to do this.

From where I stood, I only saw what looked like a man. Mother said to me, "Well, Lisa, if a man leaves a woman and her children, people are a bit upset but they wonder how she drove him away, but when a woman does as Sally did, well, people always make her the blackest villain. Maybe I did do something wrong, but Sally isn't the blackest villain." Her voice changed as the head finally loosened its hold on the logs and rolled over. "I don't think we did him any favors."

Not Dad. I came down and screamed when I saw the face. Worms seemed to have eaten the face. I couldn't imagine *tubifex* that thick or

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such leeches in our pond. Whatever was eating his face, some of them bled as red as human blood.

Mother put her finger out, felt down one of the worm things and said, "It's part of his face."

I screamed again when the mouth moved under the tentacles.

"Don't," Mother said. "Only our thinking makes monsters. But I don't think we did him any favors."

"Him? Why a him?"

"A woman would have planned better to be rescued or would have drowned herself deeper." Mother hauled the thing further up on the bank. "We need to get him inside. People around here tend to really polarize issues."

We need to call the cops, the Army, the CIA, I thought, but since Dad left us, I was afraid if I made Mother angry, she'd leave me, too. But I couldn't go near the thing. "I can't go near the thing."

"He was trying to kill himself, so I'd say he's harmless. Now are you going to help or do you want to go back to the house, do the breakfast dishes, then cook lunch."

"What does it eat?" I asked, meaning to stall.

But Mom knew how I could stall by asking questions. "Quit being such a baby. He's hurt."

I wondered if we ought to be interfering with the monster's suicide, but Mother liked to fuss, so I said, "I'll take his feet," hoping that those wouldn't be an even greater horror than the face.

Mother said, "Teeth look like he might be a pure carnivore."

Just what we needed, I thought, now that Dad left us. The thing's skin at the feet was thick and clammy, like a purse some thief had thrown into the pond. "Mom, Dad might not have left you if you weren't such a sucker for males in pain."

"I wasn't going to make a career of adultery," she said. "Your Dad knew I was sorry afterward."

The alien between us said, "Can the universe produce pure evil?" He spoke perfect English. I nearly dropped his feet.

"If you thought you were pure evil and decided to drown yourself, then I guess you're not pure evil," Mother said. "Pure evil would never help the world by eliminating itself."

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The tentacles circled and then seemed to form two groups pointing back at Mom. "You didn't do me any favors."

"You wanted to upset my child by leaving your dead body in our pond?"

I asked, "What do you eat?"

He said, "I'll die on you."

"Try me," Mom said.

I realized now that Mom had captured a vulnerable male, she'd never let him leave. Suicides are always aimed killings, but while this one hadn't been aimed at us, Mom was furious with disappearing guys even if they escaped through the grave. Even at eleven I didn't want her to save some monster with tentacles from the top of his head to his mouth and even around that. But what I most feared was that Mom would prefer this sick alien who needed both physical and psychic nursing to me. Maybe if I tried suicide myself, I thought, she'd notice I was more than an ear to dump in.

The alien squirmed, but Mom twisted his shoulders and kneed him in the head as though by accident. "If I let you go, you'd just go back to the pond."

"Your daughter's seen me, so it wouldn't be a shock."

"How come you speak English?" I asked.

"He's an observer," my mother said. "If he had been going to hurt us, he could have done so before he completely mastered the language."

The alien let his tentacles splay in all directions. I wondered if his eyes were compound like an insect's or if each tentacle end was a more perfect eye than a squid's. Squid eyes are even better evolved than mammal eyes. And when his tentacles splayed like that, was he not seeing anything or scanning for movement without fine focusing?

How would I ever understand the planets and space? If I'd been good at math, I could have become a scientist, my daddy told me before he left. I wondered if he'd have forgiven Mother if I'd been a boy math whiz. Cunt that threw a pity fuck at some loser and her daughter who was too stupid for quadratic equations, why should Dad have stayed?

While I thought I knew the theories, half my answers came out wrong because somewhere in my calculations, I'd reverse figures without noticing. The figures I transposed made the bars of my prison.

So Mother and I hauled the alien to the house and put him in the

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basement on a fold-out bed we kept for when her brother might come to see us. The alien gathered his seeing tentacles, looked around the room, then looked at us. I wondered if we seemed as monstrous to him.

He said, "My planet was rotated away from my sun."

Mother stood there, waiting for him to explain why that put him in our pond. I said, "Into another dimension," numerical ghosts and topological diagrams whipping through my brain. Yes for the theories, no for the figuration. Mother looked at me sharply.

The alien said, "Yes."

Mother said, "Time-space slippage." She read the books I bought down at the drugstore even though every time I bought them, the druggist asked if I was buying them for my brother or boy friend. He'd figured in my head shakes that I was ashamed of my sweetheart.

"My species was sentenced to die."

Mother said, "If anyone has the power to rotate a planet away from its sun, they sure as hell had the power not to commit genocide."

The alien said, "With the whole universe against you, deciding you're the evil one is the most logical course. Otherwise, the universe is insane."

I thought that seemed logical, but Mother said, "Nothing about this universe is altogether that consistent. Now, what do you eat?"

"Live mammals."

"If you don't torture them, I can get you plenty of rabbits, lab rats. Can't you do with chickens?"

"I don't torture my food. I love my food. Chickens lack essential amino acids." I think he wondered how bright we were after all. "The proteins aren't complete, but they're an okay supplement."

Mom said, "You better not love either of us that way or we'll pull out your tentacles. Bet we can come up with some synthetics suit you just fine, or the right combination of plant proteins."

"Wrong proteins break me out in welts," he said.

"Hives," Mother said. "I get them when I eat strawberries. Well, how would a rabbit suit you? I know a man who's got eating rabbits for sale. And I could get lab stuff from the college."

"You're not a professor?"

"No. Lab tech. But I understand about amino acids and protein allergies just fine."

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"Why are you saving me? I would have rotted into nothing in the pond."

Mother stopped tucking blankets around him and said, "Nobody has the right to be in that much despair."

"I'm not human."

"Are you trying to tell me that you were killing yourself for some alien reason that doesn't have anything to do with anger, despair or guilt? You weren't trying to use your death to obliterate a universe that wanted to obliterate you?

"All of those reasons, yes. And alien ones you'd never understand."

"You sound like a damned self-centered man to me."

"I'm not human. Your values don't apply to me."

"You'll be glad we saved you later. I can't believe anyone tried to wipe out your whole species and killed every other living thing on your planet to do this, wiped out all the evolutionary possibilities. That's like wrecking a museum. If they ever show up on this planet, I sure wouldn't trust them."

The alien collapsed his tentacles again into flesh spagetti. "I'm going to go crazy."

"Humans don't let crazy people kill themselves, either," my mother said. "And you're making too much sense to be insane."

The tentacles knotted themselves, pulled the knots through, over and over. I wondered if that's what alien crazy looked like. Then the alien laughed, sharp teeth and all. "Oh, that hurt."

"I had to break some of them to get you loose," Mom said. "Do you want to wash them out and put anything on them or would you just try to drown yourself in the bathroom sink?"

"I'd like about five pounds of rabbit." He began pulling his tentacles through his fingers, the other tentacles wincing when he touched the injured ones. "I'm an interstellar fugitive. Turn me in. You could be richly rewarded."

I wondered if we were going to keep him forever in our basement. Mom said, "You must have a way of communicating with your people."

"My home planet's gone. The people who did that will trace any signals to survivors off planet."

I asked, "Don't you have other people here with you?"

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He shook his head, though perhaps he was lying.

"Then, there you have it," Mother said. "You've been alone for a while. If being alone would have driven you insane, you'd have gone mad long before you spoke such perfect English."

I thought, but at least he could talk to his people. Then I wondered if he was only dangerous in groups. Some fish are like that. You could carefully train five of them from fryhood to only eat gold fish and then you could keep them with other fish that weren't gold colored. But if you had seven of them, say, they'd teach each other to be much more dangerous.

Whatever, Mother sure hadn't been babbling about people I hardly knew and never cared about since we dragged him out of the pond. She said, "Lisa, why don't you go over to Mr. Jackson's and buy us a suckling pig. I think our friend here might need some fat calories, too. That is, if you're not allergic to pig?"

The alien said, "You prefer I take the head in one bite?"

Mother nodded. We'd feel better if his food didn't suffer. "So, you could eat freshly killed meat?"

"Only if very fresh," the alien said. "That's what made us seem like monsters, I'm afraid."

Mother said, "Crueler to hang some dumb bird by the feet and swing it around on a slaughter line than to bite its head off."

"Mother, he can't live off chicken," I said. "Didn't you listen?"

"We can set some live traps for rats," Mother said.

"Rats go for the tentacles," the alien said. "You plan to save me, you need to get me food now."

I took twenty dollars to Mr. Jackson's and bought two suckling pigs and carried them home squealing in a burlap bag. He seemed pretty surprised that we wanted to raise hogs, but, along with the pond, we did have an old hog lot that came with the property. But I figured that we'd have to vary the alien's diet or someone would wonder what were we doing with all sorts of suckling pigs and rabbits.

That night, I had a nightmare with the alien sometimes being the horror figure, sometimes being Mom's friend and so the good guy. I woke up paralyzed with nightmare juice, then got my body back. He had to have been a spy, but since we were neither dead nor under alien domination, then perhaps he wasn't altogether that dangerous.

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Mother began talking about all sorts of people we used to know when we lived in town with Dad, not here in an old farmhouse with an alien in the basement. Only now I had the alien to trade wry glances with, his tentacles rocking back and forth, me raising my eyebrows. My mother, the adulteress on the edge of town, turned so harshly moral now no one even bothered to see if she could be had.

I went to school and read as much science as didn't come twisted in math. A boy took interest in me. He was good in math and had shortwave radios, and wire recorders from the Second World War. He taught me how to make gunpowder from sulfur, saltpeter, and barbecue charcoal ground up into powder between two bricks.

If I took my clothes off, I could join the boys' short-wave radio club. Down in the woods, I took my clothes off. Still naively clothed since he himself was only thirteen, he lay down on top of me and all the other boys hidden in the woods around the brush hut giggled.

Mother got my secret out of me and questioned me away from the alien for hours. Had he penetrated? With what, I wanted to know. With his dick, no, but I prayed for my period to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything, to make sure I wasn't pregnant.

A year and a half later, I got my first period and it reminded me again that I wasn't supposed to be good at science, not even interested in it. Girls who were curious got molested.

The alien turned into the ordinary creature in the basement until I discovered Kafka when I was fifteen. "Metamorphosis" turned me inside out and over. I knew for the first time what it might mean to live in a world that would prefer one to be dead. Without completely thinking out the consequences, I took the book home to the alien. We sat weeping and wringing tentacles together, reading pages, tearing them up, chewing them to paper pulp with huge carnivorous teeth, spitting them out.

The alien said, "Now you understand."

I said, "But Gregory Samsa didn't want to die, even if he'd become a large bug." I felt as though the boy from my last innocent years lay down on me again, cloth against skin, surrounded by snickering boys. "What can we do?"

The alien said, "You can mature."

"To be like my mother?"

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"To listen to your mother all day long."

"She wants me to read romance novels to prepare me for life. Do you really want to be dead?"

"Not badly enough to fight your mother," the alien said.

I PAID THE FINE to the library for eating "Metamorphosis" out of the Kafka collection, and continued in high school, mocked in the halls by girls who'd never been so foolish as to get naked to join a science club. I wished we could have all moved away, my mother, the alien, and me, to somewhere kind.

"What you want is a land that has never existed," the alien said. "Certainly not any planet I've ever heard about."

I was stupid. Because I'd taken my clothes off years earlier, I failed Algebra II. Then, at eighteen, my freshman year in college, I caught my teeth before they met through the cockskin of my first naked man.

"Be careful," he said, not knowing how I craved to bite and bite.

I pulled back and said, "We shouldn't be doing this," and dressed and left him. The world had men in it who wanted their cockskin bitten and my teeth ached. But the ones who wanted it were never grown science boys who'd gotten some stupid girl naked to initiate her into the reality that girls are truly too stupid for short-wave radios. The guys who wanted my pain would make my teeth feel dirty. They provoked attacks, attacks that would make me feel vile and would make me hurt them all the more.

The alien knew something more wrong had happened. I saw his tentacles squirming and wanted to bite them, wanted to bite my own nipples. I said, "I nearly did a man serious damage."

The alien said, "With what?"

"With my teeth," I said.

He squirmed his tentacles in what I knew was a smile. He said, "Let me see your teeth."

I bared my teeth at him, feeling both rage and futility. He ran a thick-skinned finger around my mouth and said, "Your teeth are so ambiguous. Do you want to bite me?"

"No."

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He said, "I would like you to bite me. On the shoulder. On the breast. I'll keep you away from my tentacles."

He took my head in his hands and guided me. I bit him over and over on the leathery skin, the teeth running wild, me crying. Then exhausted, I leaned against him and he stroked my hair as though that were something Mother taught him.

"In a few days, I'll have skin food," he said. "I hope you aren't allergic to it."

"You're going to feed me?"

"Our young have blunt teeth. This would make me happy."

"How hard do I have to bite?" I asked, my teeth satiated for now.

"Until you learn that not everything male tries to shame you," the alien said.

So I bit little roast beef sections of skin away, weeping for all the math that turned his world away from his sun and kept me from understanding how my universe operates. Eventually, I forgave my twelve-year-old self for being so naive and my mother for not better preparing me and the alien for being male with tentacles.

Some years later, when he sickened, Mother and I took him back to the pond. Mother gave him a dose of poison in a little white paper lab cup, but he held it for a while in his swollen hands, arranged his tentacles to see us as well as he could, and said, "Well, now, this is a happy ending for someone."

"Not for me," I said. "But was our saving you worth it fifteen years ago?"

"Worth it for you, I think," the alien said. He took the poison and swam out into the pond since the oak had rotten away.

Mother said, "I've thought about applying for the reward."

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The second of our cover stories is Esther Friesner's "King of the Cyber Trifles." Esther won the short story Nebula in 1996, and her story, "A Birthday," from our August 1995 issue was a finalist for the Hugo. Her most recent novels are Child of the Eagle, *published by Baen, and* The Sword of Mary, *published by White Wolf.*

About this story, Esther writes, "The title was knocking around in my head for a while and [the] request for a story based on that gorgeous cover painting gave me the perfect excuse. (By the way, for the benefit of the literarily deprived, the title's a pun on King of the Khyber Rifles, *which I confess to having read only in the* Classics Illustrated Comics *form.)"*

King of the Cyber Trifles

By Esther M. Friesner

MY NAME IS BLAZE KNIGHTLY. I'm a cop. A webdick, if you want to get technical about it. My beat stretches from the farthest reaches of the galaxy to the blackest depths of the human heart. No, really.

It was nine-fifteen on a Monday night. Things were pretty quiet in LA. It had been one hell of a three-day weekend. Most of the weirdos and sick puppies had burned themselves to ash pretty steadily from Friday afternoon on. Now they were either holed up in their crummy little rooms, sleeping off their crummy little cyberbenders, or staring down both barrels of their crummy little workweek lives and wishing they could plug into http://oblivion.com. Back to work, back to reality checks. I could almost feel sorry for the poor suffering bastards. Yeah, sure I could, if they didn't screw up my life so much. Charity begins *ad hominem*. The hell with 'em.

Kaminski was on the desk. He smiled when he saw me. "Well, well, look what the net dragged in. How's it going, Knightly? Inside dope says

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you racked up some heavy points playing *Outback* last Saturday night. Y'know, that's not the way you're *supposed* to get the sheep to follow orders, loverboy."

"Save it, LaShana," I shot back. Kaminski blushed. He was six-two of solid Polska kielbasa, three times wounded in the line of duty back when he was still on the real streets. The squadroom scuttlebutt had it that he was the man who'd busted up the Northridge Rawheads and their sweet little monopoly dealing "twinkle." They said he'd acted alone, armed with nothing more than his sidearm and a bootleg tape of Richard Simmons' *Sweatin' to the Oldies*. They didn't like to talk about how he'd done it. There are some things even a hardened cop can't think about if he wants to stay sane and keep his lunch down.

Yet this was the same man who, every chance he got, slapped on the visor and the gloves, snuggled back into the sensofa, and strutted his stuff up and down the netways as LaShana Shabazz, She Who Must Be Obeyed Or She'll Hurt You, But Only If You Beg For It. It wasn't something everybody knew. Hell, it wasn't even something everybody could say in one breath. But I knew it and I could say it just fine. If I wanted to, that is.

Kaminski's a good cop. I flashed him a grin and a wink. His secret was safe with me. I wasn't going to give him grief. Besides, they said he still had that Richard Simmons tape somewhere. "Hoxie in?" I asked.

"In and on," Kaminski said. "You want I should — ?" His fingers poised over the keypad, ready to hit the sequence that would yank our beloved captain back to Earth.

I waved him off. "Nah, why bother? I'll just find him once I'm on myself." I strode past the desk and into the squadroom.

It was an easy night. Only about half the sensofas were occupied. The rest of the force — Chang, Hoffman, Shwartz, O'Donnell, Brucie, Sherman, Billy G, Resnick and Rusch — were holding down desks, up to their pretty little asses in pixelwork. You could've repainted the squadroom a nice deep shade of blue from some of the language they were using. I waved to them as I headed for my cell. Some of them waved back. Someone really oughta tell those guys that when you wave, you use all the fingers on your hand, not just the middle one.

I couldn't blame them. If I were them, I'd hate my guts too. What did those poor yingtongs have to work with? A shared netset where your

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hands fit the gloves like a skateboard fits a blimp hangar and you were lucky if the *only* thing you caught from the helmet was a fierce case of dandruff. And the futon covers on the squadroom sensofas? Let's put it this way: Don't ask about the stains. You really, *really* don't want to know.

As for me, I went into my cell and shut the door behind me, waiting for a couple of heartbeats all alone in the dark before I finally touched the lights. They came up slow and sweet, like good sex or a nice taffy apple. I'm a fool for a nice taffy apple, especially in a garter belt.

And there it was, my place, my base, my little foot-in-the-door of the great Jehovah's Witnesses roadtrip that is Justice. I sat down on the sensofa and the softly napped cotton almost purred under my touch. My custom-fitted helmet waited for me on its stand, visor up, with my gloves neatly laid out on the shelf below. I picked up the ID monocle and let it get a good, close look at my retinal patterns. "Here's looking at you, kid," I muttered. As soon as I was cleared for entry I geared up, lay back, and slid into the net.

I was no sooner gliding down the strands than I had company. *Knightly?* It was Hoxie. I'd know those teeth anywhere, and that long, pink, naked tail. A zillion forms you can take in the 'scape and my captain's the giant rat of Sumatra. *He* says it's because he's a big Arthur Conan Doyle fanboy and all of the other shapes in the Holmes universe were already taken by the time he could tag one. I say that when a man knows himself that well, who am I to ask questions?

The rat sat in a sherbet-colored striped beach chair set down in the middle of Generic Tropical Paradise #14C, a can of Coors in one paw, a Harvard T-shirt covering his furry chest. He was sipping the brew through a straw. Class will tell.

Got a hot one for you. The words seemed to echo inside my skull. When Hoxie hit the web, he never opted to have his virtual self simply *talk*. The one time I cared enough to ask why, he told me: "Talking rats aren't real." Yeah, and telepathic, Coors-swilling, Harvard-educated rats are?

Well, okay, maybe the Harvard part.

"Do tell." I was still in shimmer-mode; I hadn't yet picked a personal seeming to suit this conversation, mostly because I hadn't yet decided

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what would piss off Hoxie most. We've all got our priorities. "Let me guess: Some teenaged mouth-breather from Malibu discovered that the girl of his dreams is really the guy next door? Open-and-shut City. I can knock down a dozen cases like that on my coffee break."

So could a rookie, Hoxie replied. He bared his yellow teeth at me in what passed for a smile. To be frank, it looked a hell of lot friendlier than the grins he gave me when he was in human form. (In Hoxie's case, the term human is more by way of a biotag than an accurate description, even when he's offline.) *Nuh-uh, Knightly, this is something you can sink your teeth into. If you're gonna *have* teeth any time soon.*

If he thought he could force me to pick a seeming by mouthing off wise like that, he was right.

"You mean like this?" I asked casually, and in the flicker of a pixel I erupted from shimmer-mode into the towering form of an Allosaurus. I picked him up by his tail just as the pink sands and emerald palms of his dream-beach were swallowed whole by the rending earth and churning lava of one of Jurassic Earth's more stunning geological hissy-fits. I let him dangle so that he could get a nice, close look at my dino dentures, even though it meant taking a few physiological liberties with the structure of my forearms. It was a trick that should've brought the opgods down on me like white on rice, but I've got more than a little juice with them and they let me have my fun as long as I keep it short and clean up after.

Put me down, you bastard! Hoxie squirmed and thrashed, his beady eyes brimming with impotent rodential rage. *Put me down or I'll have you pounding a beat in Flatbush!*

Of course he didn't mean the real Flatbush, as in Brooklyn, as in New York, as in all the way across the country — he couldn't. What he did mean was the Virtual Flatbush that was the pet project of our beloved Police Commissioner, a guy whose only fault was watching too many old black-and-white cop flicks as a pup. Virtual Flatbush started out as a game, but he made it so exquisitely detailed, so extraordinarily authentic, so damned *good* that the opgods gave it permanent status on the net and gave him a cyberlord's say in what happened there.

Soon as word got around, it became the *primo* scene for singles who wanted mates from their own ethnic groups, but who didn't dare say so out loud in realtime for fear of being tagged Politically Incorrigible. It also

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evolved into a handy penalty box for cops who hadn't broken any actual rules, but who had cheesed their bosses a time too many. The luckless saps who got shipped off into that little slice of Fantasyland soon discovered just why they used to call us "flatfoot." I could put up with the aching feet and I could tolerate the persistent, all-pervasive smell of simulated gefilte fish, but there was no way I was going to say "Faith an' begorrah" every time I wanted to start a sentence.

I put Hoxie down.

"So what's the case?" I asked. I shipped my Allosaurus form bye-bye and restored Hoxie's beach. I even tweaked myself into the seeming of a nubile Jamaican waitress, bearing drinks that resembled a bad explosion at Carmen Miranda's favorite hat shop. The only thing that glowed more brightly than those tall tumblers full of rum-'n'-roughage was the warning bleeper over my nametag. I made sure Hoxie got a good, close look at it when I bent over to hand him his drink, just so he could see I was sticking to the rules. It'd be just like him to give me the Flatbush flush over a technicality.

Hoxie's a jerk, but he makes up for it by being an anal-retentive nitpicker. He took his time checking out the bleeper. Either that, or he was checking out my cleavage, the rat. I subvoc'd a prayer to the opgods and without warning the bleeper bloomed to five times its original size, thwacking Hoxie's snout good and hard.

"Sorry, mon," I said, keeping a straight face. "Thought you couldn't see it that small."

Hoxie rubbed his nose with his paws. *You're a weirdo, Knightly, you know that? What're you trying to prove?*

"Just trying to do you a favor, sir," I replied smoothly. "Remember, next year the Olstead Act goes into effect. I wouldn't want to have my beloved captain brought up on sexual harassment charges just because he couldn't keep his beady little eyes off a woman's bosoms, even if that woman is a man." I tapped my bleeper to underscore my point. The unit reacted as advertised, flashing the message *Warning! Not Client's Authentic Gender!* for anyone to see.

Goddam lawyers. Hoxie's impressive incisors ground together. Everyone in the precinct knew his opinion of the Olstead Act. It was just the same as his opinion of the previous body of legislation that had

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brought bleepers into existence. According to him, they'd taken all the fun out of virtual reality when they forced the opgods to slap those pesky little VR truth-tellers onto anyone walking the web. He flopped back down into his beach chair and took a long pull at his drink. *It's censorship, that's what it is, Big Brother and a whole bunch of cyber sob sisters who can't hack the net solo, so Mommy's gotta hold their weensy, wussy little hands. Ruin it for all of us, the weenies.*

"Hey, *vox populi, vox dei,*" I told him. "You should've e-mailed your congressoid if you didn't want it to pass."

Assholes want it both ways, Hoxie snarled, ignoring me and my Latin. He wouldn't recognize a Classical allusion if it bit him on the *a posteriori*. *First they make us wear these things so there's no effing doubt about who we really are, *then* they slop on a whole new law saying we gotta treat each other like what we look like we are too. Shit, talk about confusing.*

"Oh, I'd be grateful if I were you, Hoxie," I said. "This way if anyone messes with you, you get 'em for assaulting a police officer and cruelty to dumb animals."

Very funny, Knightly. Ha, ha, ha. Now you think you could maybe cut the comedy and give the taxpayers some service for a change?

"Sure, soon as you decide to stop pissing and moaning about Olstead and give me the case instead of all this Luddite bullshit."

I tweaked myself into my preferred shape for business-as-usual, the seeming by which all my best contacts and snitches on the net knew me: Male Causcasian, six foot two, blond hair, blue eyes, perfect teeth, and one hundred ninety supple pounds of muscle. The bleeper above the breast pocket of my white linen planter's jacket used a discreet yet legible scale to show where this seeming ranked on the Warners' Aesthetic Index as compared to my true face and body. (Truth to tell, there wasn't all that much distance between them, and what there was, was on account of my real teeth. Those taffy apples will get you every time.) I summoned myself a second beach chair and sat down, a gin-and-bitters in my hand. "Spill."

Hoxie gave me the whole story. I'd been hoping for a challenge, after the big buildup he'd been giving me, a change from the same-old-same-old, but this didn't sound like it. Someone had shown up on the web sans bleeper, and this someone was too slick for any of the regular topicops to

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apprehend. It happens. Despite the laws, there's always some young hotshot who thinks every cyberrule comes with a codicil that reads *This Does Not Mean You.*

It's always the smart ones, big surprise, the ones who grew up so brilliant that their parents had to wear mirrorshades just to read their report cards. I don't care how many sludge-slices of Geraldo you've seen, parents are still human. They brag about their brainy offspring. Nothing wrong with them being proud of their kids, but I say if they're going to brag about them to other parents, they ought to do it in real small doses. They don't.

So what happens? The parents they brag *to* come down hard on their own kids with the ever-popular *Why can't you be as smart as Norbert?* riff. I know it'll come as a shock to you, but this does not make the little sprats burst into cheery can-do grins and reply "Why, thank you, Mumsy and Daddy, that was really all I needed to hear to make me stop wasting so much precious study time watching MTV and devote myself to a life of algebra and celibacy." No, it has other results.

Result number one: The not-so-bright kids make a unilateral decision about who's at fault for this new crop of parental nagging. Uh-huh: Norbert. Poor tyke gets the heart teased out of him (and the crap pounded ditto) every chance they get. Or if it's Norbertina we're talking about, the only time she gets asked out on dates is when the guy's been told to bring his grades up or kiss his driving privileges goodbye. Guess who gets kissed goodbye as soon as Mister Wonderful pulls his geometry marks out of the toilet?

Result number two: When Norbert comes home crying, do Mom and Dad figure out that maybe they should ease up on the bragging? No, they like rubbing their friends' noses in it, even if *it* is their offspring. So instead they tell Norbert that the other kids are just jealous and that being smart is the only thing that matters in this world.

Result number three: Norbert believes them.

Result number four: Norbert decides he doesn't have to do anything with his life *except* be smart. This means he bags such trivia as learning how to make friends, dabbling in empathy, having a conversation that isn't a monologue of all his accomplishments, and observing the basic rules of personal hygeine. Rules are for people who only got B's in

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Advanced Calculus. If you're smart enough to slip around the law, it doesn't apply to you.

Hey, Norbert, I've got a newsflash for you: This is America, where it doesn't matter how smart you are, the law applies to *everyone.*

Unless you're rich. Or a celebrity. Preferably both.

Hoxie scrolled me an update on this particular Norbert against the background of the tropical sunset. Over ten thousand complaints filed, and that was just in the Central LA area. There was reason to believe that our man (if he was a man) was spreading his cybersleaze faster than an oil spill.

"It's spooky, how fast and how far this perp's gone," Hoxie said. "The first complaints started coming in yesterday, and now look!"

Yeah, the complaints. They looked like The Usual too: misrepresentation of interpersonal intentions with linked implied long-term emotional commitment. In other words, L-O-V-E. How can one little word cause so much trouble? Love fouls the net worse than a rogue nanosquid. Everybody's looking for it, everybody wants it, and everybody's mighty miffed when they discover that the sweet thang they've been spending precious online minutes to impress turns out not to be the answer to their passionate prayers but — well — Norbert.

And then there was Part Two, because without Part Two the whole thing was a case for Dear Abner, not the LA{VR}PD: Alienation of personal resources. That's theft, to you. Not the kind of theft where someone lifts your wallet or your TV or your truck — we've got separate sections of the criminal code covering all that — but the cyber kind. Virtual larceny, where you're stripped bare as a boiled bone, only you don't know it until you log on.

Hoxie looked grim. You didn't have to explain cyber theft to him. When the last Mrs. Hoxie packed up and went East, she didn't bother filing for a fat community property settlement, she just hacked into his personal area in the 'scape and cleaned it out to the walls. I was there when he logged on the first time after she left. He didn't suspect a thing.

"She said she didn't want anything from me, just her freedom," he said, smirking. "Man, I made out like a bandit. C'mon over to my place, Knightly, and we'll celebrate. I just built up an authentic replica of the Baths of Caracalla, complete with slave girls. You've never seen anything like it."

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And I never did. When we got on, it was into blank space that went on forever. No baths, no slave girls, not even a hole to flop into and die. It was pitiful. You could've heard Hoxie's scream all the way to Long Beach. We took it to the opgods, but they said that there was no law forbidding anyone with access to a specific area from offloading said area or portion of same.

There still isn't. *I love you, darling, give me access to your area,* says Norbert, and Norbert's mark complies. Then Norbert moves in, latches onto a big slice of virtual real estate, and annexes it to his own holdings. Holdings, need we add, to which Norbert's mark has *no* access. ("He was *going* to give me access, but he ran into a system glitch that couldn't be fixed until Monday. That's what he told me, anyway, and he was sooooo sincere that I — " Yeah, yeah. Been there, mopped up after that.)

It wasn't the complaints themselves that pushed all my uh-oh buttons, it was the sheer volume. No matter how hungry for love you are, no one jumps into it headfirst. All of our other online robber barons had to work on it for months before anyone swore out a complaint against them. It takes time to chat up a potential mark, even for the most skilled of netcrawlers. This is LA: Trust no one, question everything, and you can always watch *X-Files* re-runs if you can't get a date.

"How long's he been at it?" I asked. As soon as the gender-specific pronoun left my virtual lips, our shared 'scene bleeper posted a self-righteous *Attention! Client's Antiquated Patriarchocentric Diction in No Way Implies Disrespect Toward or Oversight of Women.*

I told you, since yesterday.

"No, you told me the first complaints started *coming in* yesterday. I want to know when this bullchip artist began trolling for lonelyhearts. If I can get a handle on that, it narrows down my field of inquiry a treat."

Hoxie's teeth showed pretty. *That's just it, Knightly: The perp started operating sometime Sunday morning and by Sunday afternoon we were up to our asses in e-mail from all the jojos he'd transduced and abandoned. What's more, our trackers say that this guy — * (Again the 'scene bleeper went off) * — wasn't even an active account until midnight Saturday.*

I let out a long, low whistle of admiration. "That's one fast worker. Too fast."

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*Then maybe *you'd* better put on a little speed too.*

I became a genie, complete with lamp, the lamp complete with warning label stating that this form was a registered fantasy archetype and in no way implied the user's ability to fulfill anyone's wishes nor did it intentionally demean those ethnic groups from whose folklore it was derived. I bowed from a smoky waist and said, "Your wish is my command."

A simple, "Yes, sir" will do, wiseass.

Oh, really? Okay. I raised a deliberately wobbly, two-story high YES SIR out of sand and winked out of Hoxie's area before the whole thing collapsed on the rat, beach chair and all.

I let myself drop through the strands of the net until I reached my regular hangout. It was a shabby office right out of an old *noir* flick, complete with whiskey bottles in the desk's drawers and *zaftig* secretary trying to get into mine. Raymond Chandler would've been proud. I picked up the phone and made a few calls. As soon as the first response came in, I winked out of the office and into the alleyway where Mugsy was waiting.

Mugsy sat on top of one of the battered trash cans, a rotting herring in his mouth.

"Looking good, Mugsy," I said, scratching him behind the ears.

He spat out the herring and took a swipe at me with his claws. "Save it, Knightly." Unlike Hoxie's persnickety personal no-talking-animals rule, my best snitch saw nothing wrong with being a fully verbal alley cat. "I look like hell, thanks to you." Nothing wrong, that is, except the alley cat part.

"Hey, I paid you for the information on the Salazar case. It's not my fault you stepped on some toes to get it."

"But it is your fault for not telling me that Salazar was a Northridge Rawhead." The cat growled deep in his throat. "A Rawhead with connections. Now I gotta lay low in this seeming until the heat's off."

"So I made a mistake. I had faulty information. I thought Kaminski wiped the Rawheads off the map."

The cat said a word I wouldn't use to a dog. "The day you got faulty info is the day I sprout feathers."

"You did that already. Last year for Mardi Gras, remember? And as far as *where* you sprouted them — "

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"Oh, shut up." Mugsy started licking his paws nervously. "You're a piece of work, Knightly, you know that? You don't care who you use or what happens to 'em after you use 'em, as long as you crack your case. You got a heart in there or just a motherboard?"

"Wait, I'll check," I said dryly, reaching my hand into my chest and yoinking out a red satin-covered, lace-trimmed box of Valentine's Day chocolates. I opened it and held it out so Mugsy could see what was inside.

The cat's eyes got big as he scoped the mouth-watering assortment of personal area enhancement scenarios. Long before I joined the force, I used to make 'em for a hobby. I still do, only now it's on the muni tab. The department doesn't give me a big budget to work with, but I'm one cop who knows how to make the most of my allotted toys. Details, that's the key: If you've got a mind for details, you can take the smallest online area and turn it into something special. Most people are content if their VR 'scapes just look pretty, but I know how to program the fullest scope of sensory experiences into the tightest space. Engrave the Lord's Prayer on the head of a pin? Man, I could engrave it on the *point*, virtually speaking.

And that was my stock-in-trade when dealing with snitches. You don't win a snitch's help with dirty old money. A good snitch doesn't need *money*. It's not cheap running an account at this level. The low rollers stick to the web's surface, like the mayflies they are. Down here, in the chips carries two meanings, and anyone as deep into the net as me — or should I say me as duly ordained representative of the LA(VR)PD? — has money to burn. You have to buy their cooperation with something else.

Mugsy raised one trembling paw and reached for a scenario featuring the Amazon rainforest and a pair of statuesque identical twins from Sweden. Pretty run-of-the-mill script, until you realized just how many levels of sensual input I had programmed into that bonbon. Mugsy knew, and he was aching. I slammed the box shut before he could touch it. "You know the rules, pal. First we talk business."

He kept staring at the closed box, as if he could will it open. He even tried a few break-and-enters but I brushed them off. "Come on, Mugsy, I don't have all run. Ten to one you know what I want and where I can find it. Hand it over and you'll be up to your loins in nubile *lutefisk* before you can say meow."

Mugsy looked up at me. "Hanh?"

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I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Tell me where I can hook up with the Interfacing Bandit and you get the Lundborg twins ASAP."

Mugsy sang pretty. When he was done, I grinned and patted him on the head. "You done good, kid. Open wide." He opened his mouth and I popped the bonbon in. He closed his eyes in bliss. My fantasies melt in your mouth, not in your hands. Or paws. Or whatever. Then he vanished, in search of the unplumbed reaches of the Amazon, but not before I winked out too.

I came through the net in a swirl of silvery bubbles. All around me, multicolored fish swooped and darted on the currents playing around the great coral reef. As soon as I made splashdown, I knew that dis mus' be da place. Good old Mugsy. In the world of netcrime, knowing where to jump the strand is half the battle. My quarry might seem to be in hundreds of places at once, but the web's got *millions* of sites. A snitch's most useful function is telling his patron just where to go.

Nice place, too. The water was the most perfect cerulean blue, even though we were deep enough into the net for me to need a diving helmet. It wasn't just for show, either; not when I could virt up a set of gills easy as breathing. This helmet was for protection of a more practical kind.

The Norberts of this world are funny critters: When you catch one with his hands in the cookie jar, he'll come along quietly and take his spanking without too much fuss. Sometimes you catch one who fusses because he doesn't *get* his spanking soon enough to suit him. (We generally turn those cases over to Kaminski and don't ask too many questions after.)

But sometimes — and this is what separates the webdicks from the wannabes — you find one that fights back.

I've been in a few down-and-uglies with Norberts turned nasty. If I had scars, I'd show 'em to you. Truth is, I *could* show 'em, but it wouldn't be wise. They're all hung up pretty in a closet far at the back of my most private online area where access is failsafed to keep out everyone but me. When things get too quiet on the job and I think it'd be nice to see some real action, I go there to let those castoff seemings talk some sense into me. I take 'em out of the closet one by one and look at the gaping holes, the shattered skulls, the little bags full of goop that used to be me.

Memento mori, baby. The jerk on the street thinks that VR's all

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dressup and pretend, no one gets hurt, not really. Shows what he knows. Every time you take a hit in VR that'd kill you offline, you get booted from the web and you can't go back on until you play Mother, May I? with the opgods. What's more, you can never resume the seeming that got offed. It's all part and parcel of the Spelling-Peckinpaugh Agreement, a law they rammed through I.N.O. (International Netwardens' Olympus, home of the opgods) when it looked like a lot of juveniles were starting to believe that death was just a temporary inconvenience, offline as well as on. You know, like in X-Men comic books.

Acts have consequences, even virtual acts. *Good-bye* doesn't mean the same thing as *See you later*. Hell of a tough lesson to teach even when you're surrounded by examples, made even tougher by teens who think they're immortal anyhow.

Cowards die a thousand times before their deaths. So do webdicks. Only difference is we feel every one of those thousand deaths when it happens. The more authentic a seeming we can call up, the more authentic the pain when some Norbert takes it down. And then there's the little matter of TruDeth.

They don't talk about TruDeth out there, up near the surface, where the web's kept nice and shiny for the weekend browsers. They don't even breathe the word in all the action scenies — *Net Ninjas; Fatal Download; Chip-Chip, Bang-Bang* — just show some greased-up muscleboy knocking over quad-encryptions like they were playing cards.

They never show you Mel.

Mel was my friend. Mel was my partner, back when the two of us were just starting out on the force. Mel was smart; he made webdick while I was still trying not to shoot myself in the foot with a new personal enhancement device. Whenever the Norberts heard Mel was on their case, they dropped over the edge of the web like a horde of electronic lemmings.

Until one Norbert got just a little smarter than Mel, and a whole lot luckier, and zapped him with a virus when he wasn't looking. Now Mel's still in the net, but his body's in perpetual care back at Cedars-Sinai. They can keep it going, only not forever; not on a webdick's medbennies. They won't let him die — not with the lawbirds circling — they'll simply do the bare minimum to keep him breathing. And there's no law that says they have to keep him hooked into the net once his autopay account stops

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covering his online time. Every so often I pass the hat to keep Mel connected, but lately all I've been collecting are excuses. I know what they're thinking: Why postpone the inevitable? And so the day's not far off when, even if Mel finally does untangle himself from that virus and find his way back home, he'll discover he's still cut off from his body forever. That's TruDeth for you.

I decided that wasn't going to happen to me. Not on this case. Not on my salary. The diving helmet was attached to a deepsea suit that was a solid mesh of antivirals. Maybe it would slow my response times some, but slow is always better than dead.

I surveyed the scene. A fresh cloud of fish shimmied across my field of vision. Vermillion seaweed did the hoochy-koo. Despite my protective shell, I allowed for remote sensations, like ambient temperature and how the water would smell and feel if I were into full immersion. Like I said, the opgods are crazy for details, and whose work the opgods admire, him they save the butt thereof.

And then, she was there. She came darting out of the shadows of the coral reef, her glimmering fishtail churning the water, her long, black hair flowing out in a silken banner behind her. A mermaid, huh? Pretty common fantasy; I was expecting something more ambitious out of this perp. Still, I guess that when your goal is to lure in as many marks as fast as possible, you do best by sticking to the oldies. Nobody ever went broke playing to the lowest common denominator.

Anyhow, it was a damn fine mermaid, her breasts full and bare, her flexible fishtail promising all manner of slithery delights. Despite the initial distance between us, I sensed the intoxicating perfume of willing femininity just as if we'd been pressed together in an elevator car.

I altered my diving suit slightly. No sense trying to crack a case with your mind on more — ah — constricting distractions.

She sighted me and swam nearer, her eyes sparkling with interest. She wore no bleeper — I didn't expect her to — but for an instant it didn't matter. I was in love. Yeah, she was that good. No wonder she'd racked up so much carnage among the online lovelorn. Near as I could figure, it had to be something about her scent. Virtual pheromones? Nothing I'd ever heard of before, but something I'd give a pretty penny to learn more about. She and I were going to have a long geektalk about it as soon as I performed

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the service that the good taxpayers of LA expected of me. If I couldn't be in love and still take care of business, I'd be one hell of a sorry webdick.

My own bleeper was on. I had to wear it — that's the law — but it wouldn't spook her off. Sure, it said I was an LA[VR]PD webdick — that's the law, too — only no law says it couldn't display that info in Cretan Linear B, or that the bleeper itself couldn't be small enough to get "lost" in one of the folds of my diving suit. The opgods know we don't have an easy job, and they know how to stretch the rules.

At first we just sized each other up. She swam around me in smaller and smaller circles until I could feel the edge of her tail hiss over my diving suit. The scent grew stronger with each circuit. She was smiling. I waited for her to say something, to think something. Until she made her move, I couldn't run her in, and if I said something first I had to be real careful it wasn't anything a hotshot lawbird could sink his beak into as entrapment.

I felt her hands on my helmet. She wrapped her whole lissome body around me and peered into the faceplate. I forced myself to look nervous, playing the part of a too young, too rich, too nerdy kid who hadn't been this close to a woman since Mommy. In other words, easy meat. My fake adolescent anxiety seemed to charm her; she smiled more warmly and ran her hands down the sides of my helmet as if caressing my cheeks. It felt nice.

The sea around us was crackling with hormones. All the fish had skedaddled long since. I did a quick and quiet seal-off of the area so she wouldn't have a bolthole to her name once we got down to business.

I gave her a full dose of the big ol' soulful blues and said, in a voice designed to put across just the right hint of quavery teen lust, "Wow! Nice seeming. You're — you're beautiful. Can we, um, chat?"

Her teeth showed sharp and white and perfect. "About what?" she replied. "Netcrime?" And she kissed me right on the lips. Then she was gone.

So was I. The undersea paradise blinked out from around me. I was flat on my back — if that was my back — lost in a world of formless gray. I reached out for a seeming to slap on over my nakedness, but I groped in the void. Laughter surrounded me, sweet and mocking. My lips still tingled from that kiss. *That kiss which I'd felt full on my mouth despite faceplate and diving helmet and all the safeguards I'd mounted between us!*

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Surprised, Knightly?

The gray receded. I felt cold earth under me, and the sharp stab of withered grasses. I sat up slowly, the links of my chainmail shirt grinding out a loud protest. I was on a desolate hillside, a worn battle lance beside me, its pennon little more than a rag. My clothes were tattered and smelly; nothing as nice as her smell, either. There was a thick layer of dirt under my fingernails, as if I'd been trying to burrow into the hill with my bare hands.

Before I could wonder what it all meant, I heard her laugh again. She was a little downslope from me, standing on the lake, wearing what looked like a choirboy's robe, size Tight-in-All-the-Right-Places.

"It's a gown all of white samite, Knightly, you clod," she announced. I hadn't said anything, she'd simply scooped my reaction to her clothing out of my mind without a by-your-leave. "Arthurian retro-*chic*, not that you'd appreciate it. Don't you read anything but users' manuals?"

"I read you pretty good, dollface," I snarled. "What is all this?"

"Oh, do you like it?" She put on a dimpled simper fake as a preacher's promise.

"Yeah, I'm crazy for it. I can't wait to get my hands on the recipe. I'll bet you've got a unicorn stashed on the other side of this hill."

"Only if you want one. They *love* virgins."

"Forget it, sister." I stood up and a shot of pain went right through my bones. It was like I'd spent the night on the cold hillside. I gritted my teeth, refusing to let her see I was aching. "What I want is right in my reach. It's over. I know who you are and what you've been up to. You can come quietly or we can do this the hard way."

"Aren't you forgetting something, Knightly?" She still had the long, black hair, only now it was done back into a braid that fell over one shoulder and right between her breasts, gleaming like the tar on the freeway to heaven. "You can't arrest me; I haven't committed any crime. We never even got to the point where I'd ask you for access to your private areas and then I'd go in and annex them to mine."

"Hold it, hold it!" I tapped my bleeper and enlarged it so the perp couldn't help but see the embedded badge icon. If she felt like singing, I was going to get it all down for the record, nice and legal. A second tap and the LA(VR)PD software kicked in like a dream, saturating the site with the

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Miranda Act in every officially recognized Angelino language including gangslang, visually and verbally, with automatic notification dispatched to the media and the local ACLU node. Even when you're in the net, you've got to make your busts by the book. "Okay, keep talking."

She shrugged. "What's to talk? I said I never got around to doing it."

"Not to me, maybe, but — "

"Prove I did it to anybody, *Norbert*," she sneered.

That name. My name for all the sorry saps who spent their lives with one hand on the keypad and the other in their...noses. The name I'd never told to another living soul.

My name. My given name. Back in the bad old days when I was as solidly welded to the silicon tit as the next getalife, the days before I saw my parents' credit rating mercilessly gunned down during the big Hacker Riots of '05, I was Norbert Knightly, boy blob, super-cyber-genius. All that changed when Dad's data took that fatal hit in a blip-by dumping. No more online time for little Norbert then. No more hiding from the world in the web, swapping emoticons with my fellow yingtongs and pretending that nothing else mattered but being brainiacs.

Norbert Knightly was dead. So was anyone who tried to bring him back. My vision went red. I picked up the lance and aimed it at her, but it was meant for jousting, not throwing, and it wasn't going to do me much good without a horse.

"Oh, by all means, allow *me*," she said.

I was suddenly a good five feet off the ground on the back of a white charger, my lance in my hand. I just sat there, too stunned to move. Once more she'd seemingly plucked the thoughts right out of my head. No one can do that on the net, I don't care how deep they go, they can't ride the wire all the way back into your brain and go window shopping. Who was this creature? *What* was she? For the first time in my professional life, I was afraid.

"Well?" she taunted. "I'm waiting. What's the matter? *Afraid*? Not Blaze Knightly! Not the webdick's webdick, the opgods' darling! Come on, I've given you everything you need to destroy me. Don't worry about the lawbirds: I've taken the liberty of locking in a shunt scenario. If they try to find out what happened in this sector, they'll see you slapping the cuffs on me and escorting me off the web. If they bother doing a followup,

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they'll find the records of my trial, conviction and imprisonment. So? This is the chance you've been waiting for all your life, the chance to obliterate one of the worst webscum you'll ever meet. Do it! Do it now!"

And she stepped off the lake onto the shore and parted the folds of her robe wide. The space between her breasts shone like a nova.

I felt the horse begin to move forward, though I hadn't done a thing to encourage him. He went from a walk to a trot to a canter, then hit the gallop before I could blink. I was holding the lance couched real pretty, from force of habit. Time was, I used to rack up major online time playing *Merlin's Mall* (The Game of Chivalrous Shopoholics), when often the only thing standing between you and the 75% Off Electronics sale was a joust against the Black Knight. I knew how to use a lance, all right.

But what good would it do? Was she just going to stand there and let me take her down? No way. It wouldn't be that easy; it couldn't be. Had she brought me this far, sitenapped me, showed me she had more power in VR than I could imagine, only to turn herself into a sitting duck?

A trap. It had to be a trap. As soon as my lance made contact, I'd be the one zapped into the never-never. The horse was really covering ground now. I groped for the reins, wanting to slow him: No reins. I tried using my knees to turn him: No luck. I dropped the lance — that is, I tried to drop the lance. My arms were rigid, paralyzed, my fingers set in a death grip as the horse bore me inexorably down on my target. Only I knew the real target was me.

So this is how it ends, I thought. *As soon as this lance touches her, I'm hit with a shot of virus that'll make what happened to Mel look like a light sneeze. Sure wish I'd sprung for the auxiliary medbennie policy now. Oh, well, TruDeth, here I come.*

STOP!

The word boomed out and echoed on every level the 'scape could provide. It hit me in the ears and between the eyes and in the gut and in places that are none of your damned business. It filled the sky over me and became the earth under me and did things to the local property values you wouldn't believe. My horse vanished, my lance melted, and I hit the ground standing firm.

I looked at the perp. She was as dumbstruck as me. She was staring down the front of her robe at the glowing mass between her breasts, the

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ultimate source of the word of power that had put the kibosh on her evil schemes. "Darling?" she said uncertainly to her cleavage. (No argument there from me.)

*She doesn't mean *it*, she means *me*,* the glow said. *Jeez, Blaze, you *ever* gonna grow up?*

My mouth fell open like a Vuitton knockoff suitcase. "*Mel*?"

The glow chortled. *In something not quite resembling the flesh. Hiya, Blaze. Long time no interface.*

"*You're* the perp? *You're* the one who's been milking the marks for their virtual real estate?" And then, in afterthought: "*You're* the one who almost got me killed in here?"

Oh, pshaw, that wasn't my idea. Anyway, I stopped her before it went too far.

"Then why — ? What — ?" I walked closer — staggered, more like it — and seized her by the shoulders. "Mel, what's happened to you?" I shouted, shaking her violently.

She smacked me across the face and backed off, glaring. "You don't get it, do you, Knightly?" she snarled.

The glow between her breasts made a *tsk-tsk* sound and added, *She's not Mel. *I'm* Mel. And you may be my pal and former partner, but I'll thank you to keep your mitts off my fiancée.*

"Your...fiancée," I repeated as my knees buckled under me and I slumped to the earth.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, making sure I knew she wasn't. She offered me her hand. I took it, and slipped into nightmare.

I was falling through space, engulfed by a dazzling display of light and color that would shame any "twinkle" trip. Below me I saw I.N.O., shining with the compounded brilliance of the opgods, and then, off in the distant reaches of the void, a dark, amorphous mass creeping nearer, swallowing up the lesser lights that were the big online accounts, heading straight for I.N.O.

You know me, Blaze, Mel's consciousness invaded me. *I always wanted a mate who knew her own mind. Looks like I found the ultimate in spunky little vixens, huh?*

"I — I don't understand."

*What she *wants*, friend, is to clean house. You ever scope the net?

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The *whole* net? Nah, how could you? Just take my word for it, this place is too cluttered up to suit her. Any yingtong with the price of a visor comes barging into VR like he owns the joint. Pretty soon he's butting headsets with some other trolls, scrambling the 'scene, messing up some nice sites, then going home again like nothing happened. Tourists! The topicops do their best, but they can't be everywhere, and the opgods are no help at all. They think this is their turf, and if they can get rich off the paying customers, they're not going to listen to a resident's complaint. So we decided to give them some complaints they'd *have* to hear.*

The glow bloomed back into my range of vision as Mel added, *This is our home, and if the opgods won't acknowledge that and make the tourists respect it, then we'll keep fleecing the marks out of their personal areas until it's all ours again. That includes I.N.O.*

I gazed at the encroaching cloud of dark matter. "You've got hooks in some of the *opgods*?"

Mel chuckled. *What can I tell you? She's good.*

"And fast," I muttered. "How could she work so — ?"

And then I knew; I knew who Mel's fiancée really was. The answer had been there all along. How else could she have broken through my safeguards, jerked me through cyberspace so easily, known my thoughts, fallen for someone like Mel who could never have a life offline? All that, plus scoring that impressive list of consumer complaints in such a short timespan. Not even the greatest chipjockey of all time could do that. No one could do that. You'd have to be everywhere in the net at once.

You'd have to *be* the net.

A cigar boinked itself into being between my lips. Cyberspace was yanked from under me like a doormat and I was back on the hillside. This time I found myself on a checkered tablecloth, a picnic basket at my elbow. The lady sat across from me, Mel at her side. He was no longer a mere glow, but looked much the way I remembered him, only with better teeth. He had his arm around her.

She gave me a look of grudging admiration and a tuna fish sandwich. "Good dickwork, Knightly," she said.

"Thanks, uh..." What do you call the single most powerful entity in the Virtual universe?

"Call me Bitsy." I hadda ask.

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So that was it. All those years, all those amateur fantasies, all those cyberdabblers had pissed in the net once too often; now Bitsy was calling them on it. And when Bitsy called, we'd all have to listen. It looked like the end of VR as we knew it.

Hoxie out on the streets bothering *real* women? Kaminski with nothing but time and that Richard Simmons tape on his hands? Nuh-uh. Not if I could help it.

"You know, most of us aren't so bad," I told Bitsy. "Sure, *anus electronicus* isn't an endangered species, but how about the good guys? Ever come across a 'scape that made you smile? Ever fallen into an online love sonnet that made your nodes tingle? And besides, if it wasn't for human presence online, you never would've met Mel."

"*Mmm*," said Bitsy, looking thoughtful.

And that *Mmm* was the sliver that became the wedge that let me open her mind and persuade her to ease up on us poor mortal oiks. It took time, but the way Bitsy processed data, everything was settled before you could say EdMat. She returned all the areas she'd annexed in exchange for the opgods' promise to make the VR rules a little stricter, the access a little tougher, and the penalties for not cleaning up after yourself a whole lot uglier. Sure, we're gonna have a few Norb—*scofflaws* trying to get around the rules, but nothing the topicops can't handle. Not with Bitsy there to help them. Case closed, marks happy, opgods happy, Bitsy happy, Hoxie happy—

Me? Was I happy? Well...

Let's just say that I got a lot more out of this case than a promotion and a flashy equipment upgrade. See, after we worked out our differences, Bitsy took kind of a shine to me. It was mutual. Mel's not the only one who likes his females bright and spunky, and if the net isn't woman (or man, or miscellaneous) enough for more than one significant other, who is?

Mel doesn't mind. He says it's nice that we're partners again. He's even slapped on a seeming that matches my *noir* office, and Bitsy sometimes pops in to play secretary. I'll let you in on a secret: We didn't hire her for her typing skills.

Maybe pixels are no substitute for passion, but so far they do me just fine. Once a Norbert, always a Norbert, I guess.

Hey, you know the old saying: You always virt the one you love.

Put that down.

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GUILTY PLEASURES

MICHELLE WEST

The Waterborn, by J. Gregory Keyes, Del Rey, 1996, $22

I'm of two minds about hype. Not reader hype, but publisher hype, marketing hype — that glow of effusive adjectives that trip and stumble over each other struggling to reach heights of excess not previously attained before. From this less than charitable description, you can probably guess what the first of those two minds is: I detest hype. My knee jerks when I read it or hear it. My jaw clenches, my lip curls, I look at the object that was the center of so much fulsome attention and ask it if it properly came in through the service entrance.

I'm not the only reader to do this, and I'm not the most extreme. I'm not the only person who finds most advertising mind-numbingly empty of content.

And, sadly, I'm not the only reader who, with curious pique, will go to the object of such marketing adulation and sullenly demand that it prove its worth to *me*.

Which leads to the second of the two minds mentioned above: In a rational, logical world, a person who dislikes marketing hype as much as I feel I do would glide righteously beyond it, instead of approaching the object — in this case, a book — with a peculiar amalgamation of disdain and a curious hope that the book might actually live up to its billing.

Or: I don't like marketing hype, but the sad truth is, it does get the attention of reviewers, of buyers, and of readers, of which I am all three. I feel compelled to state both of these things because I came to *The Waterborn* in a markedly different way than I approached the rest of the books in this column: I wanted to see if the book lived up to its advance billing.

And the verdict: Robert Jordan's throne is not at risk — and I have to say that, as far as high fantasy goes

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at the moment, Jordan is the stick against which most writers, striving to create a world of breadth and scope, will be measured by *readers*, if my admittedly subjective experience at the store is anything to go by.

Which is a pity in its own right, because Keyes writes a very engaging, extremely readable first novel.

Hezhi is a young imperial princess on the verge of her coming of age in a society in which puberty has one of two consequences: graduation from the nursery into the court of the Lord of Nhol, the living descendent of the River, or a sudden, mysterious disappearance. Her favorite cousin D'en has become D'enata, and she is determined to find out what has happened to him — and to all of her cousins, her sisters, her brothers, those who disappear. With the help of Tsem, her loyal half-giant protector, and the rather stern and crafty guidance of the royal librarian, Ghen, she struggles her way towards knowledge and puberty. Ghen is a wonderful character, sharp and testy and quite intelligent; Tsem is comfort personified, that brooding, completely devoted protector that many of us would have liked when we were children.

Perkar is a young man who fancies himself in love with the goddess of the stream by which his family lives. One of the most fascinating elements of Keyes's world is the wildness of many of his gods, their integration into the little nooks and crannies of his universe, their often callous disregard for the lives of the humans around them. Perkar's love of the stream goddess, and his desire to protect her from the River, makes him an easy dupe for a trickster god, and a murder — albeit one witnessed and not one committed — separates him from the life he has known. Traveling with Ngangata, a small non-human, he makes his way toward Hezhi, a girl he's never met, haunted by visions of her, uncertain of whether or not he's meant to be her death.

All of the world-building is implicit; it is never made obvious or heavy enough that it slows down the story itself — which makes the book a fast read. I liked it well enough, and I'd certainly recommend that people give Keyes a try, although they might want to wait for the paperback incarnation of the book.

The Fall of Sirius, by Wil McCarthy, Roc Books, 1996, $5.50

I feel like an idiot because I missed *Aggressor Six*, McCarthy's

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first novel (that I'm aware of). Why is that my fault? Because I looked at the cover and thought: Another Marines in space fighting BEM book. At the time, I wasn't in the mood for it. I should know better — it's that judging a book by its cover thing all over again.

I opened *Fall* up, started my cursory read-the-first-few-pages scan, and got completely dragged into the story of Malyene Andreivne, a woman who is woken rather rudely out of a long sleep. A *long* sleep. Malyene, a former justice officer, is not a woman who is at peace with herself — she thinks of herself as The Monster, and with some justification — but she's not an overdrawn, angst-ridden character; her fears are subordinate to her ability to take control of both them and her situation. Which is good, as in this situation — surrounded by a totally alien culture, with only a handful of human compatriots — she needs it badly. Because she's only been rescued so that she can give her rescuers information about what happened just before she went into cryostasis — her eyewitness account of the death of everything she knew at the hands of the alien Waister fleet.

McCarthy packs a lot of information into a relatively short book, and does so in such a way that he never slows down. His prose has grace enough to be more than the usual workmanly style that hard SF aspires to, and he keeps throwing curves until the book's end. I really look forward to seeing what he does next, because I don't imagine he's going to sit still.

Highlander: Scotland the Brave, by Jennifer Roberson, Warner Aspect, 1996, $5.99

Roberson is probably best known for her *Sword* books, and she really does a very classy, very fast-paced sword-fight, which, as Highlander fans know, is a large part of the culture of Duncan MacLeod, the Highlander of the title.

In this novel, she brings back Annie Devlin, a young woman with a fanatic devotion to the IRA and its terrorist activities, and makes comfortable use of Richie Ryan and Joe Dawson. But Duncan MacLeod fair sings in her hands, and the most compelling character in the novel is one of her own creation: James Douglas, Highlander, red-haired giant and Shakespearean actor.

And that's the wonderful thing about this book. Douglas and MacLeod spark off each other as they move forward to their

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confrontation — and backward, to their mutual past. Roberson skimps on nothing; the prose is taut and clean, staccato when it needs to be, and lyrical when it can. Apparently, she lobbied for this book because she's a strong aficionado of the series — and it shows.

Kingmaker's Sword, by Ann Marston, HarperPrism, 1996, $5.50

The phrase "this book is predictable" is not the same as the phrase "this books suffers from predictability," and Marston's first novel is a very striking example of how the phrases are different. Reading it, I found that I could, with one exception, guess where the story was going — and in most cases, for me, this is the kiss of death, because if I can think that far ahead in a book, it usually means I'm not involved enough with what I'm reading in the here-and-now.

Marston's book is a delightful exception to that rule. Her opening chapters are a muted, grim look at the life of a young slave named Mouse, a boy who, after killing a bounty hunter on the road after his escape, and taking his sword, is taken under wing by Cullin of the clan Broche Rhuidh. The clans of Tyra have a distinctly Scots flavor to them. Cullin's father takes the boy in — as long-lost grandchild, and child of a favored son. The boy grows, in the service of Cullin, to become quite the fighter, and he takes the name Kian.

The narrative switches from third person to first person, a transition that often doesn't work in fantasy, but works very well here; I was impressed with the consistency of the viewpoint. Kian's voice is distinctive, and it's the best voice to tell the tale with; it's both lyrical and certain.

The sword that Kian took from the bounty-hunter is a special sword, and it brings him into contact with Kerridwen Al Jorddyn, a woman who is looking for a lost prince who carries just such a sword — and one who really doesn't like Kian much on first sight. Sparks of all sorts fly — including magical ones, the first time their swords meet — and they become a reluctant and quarrelling couple because of the ties of fate, a time-honored romantic tradition.

I liked Cullin and Kerridwen and Kian, and Marston made the most of their stories in this novel; it's the first of three (*The Western King* is probably on the shelves as you read this), but it's completely self-contained.

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Expecting Someone Taller, by Tom Holt, Ace, 1996, $5.50

Malcolm Fisher is a nice young man who has always come in a bemused second best in his family. Unfortunately, that's second best if you only count the children, of which there are exactly two, so that's had its effect on his life. Well, that and his height.

On the way home from a rather disappointing romantic interview, he accidentally hits a badger with his car. And that badger is a talking badger, a dying badger, a rather bossy creature who was "expecting someone rather taller." He gives the hapless Malcolm Fisher the ring of the Nibelungs and the Tarnhelm, and another gift besides, which is the blood of giants, and then sends him on his way to be, well, ruler of the world, since that's what all the fuss with the ring was about in the first bloody place.

Which is all very fine, but while possession is nine tenths of the law — well ten tenths of the law, really — there are rather a lot of nonhuman deities who seem to want to contest that law in whichever way they can.

Alberich, who made the ring. The Rhinemaidens, who gave him the gold. Wotan, who wants to rule the world — or at least get away from his home for a bit. The Valkyries, who would just like to do something that would make their father happy for a change, since Brunhilde made a botch of it the last chance they had to get the ring back.

Did I mention that Malcolm was a nice young man? That he was a soppy young man? Well, love jumps up and whacks him upside the head and bites him in the shin and in general causes him no end of grief — because once you're the ruler of the world, it's only the little things that can drive you to despair.

This is a wonderfully charming, very funny book, reminiscent of Pratchett in some ways because it's essentially gentle satire with a very British tone. I must have missed it the first time out, which was some time ago. Don't make the same mistake, as Ace has so thoughtfully brought it back.

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Nina Kiriki Hoffman writes charming fantasy, innovative science fiction, and some of the most terrifying horror stories we've ever read. Her foray into horror has produced some modern classics, such as "Works of Art" and "A Touch of the Old Lilith." "Manna," the third of our cover stories, marks the return of Hoffman to her horror roots — and a welcome return it is.

Manna

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

GIFTS FLY DOWN FROM THAT place above where we dare not go, blessings from Those Who Dwell in the Thinner Sky.

Sometimes the gifts are not gifts but tests.

Sometimes the gifts have poison spines or fiery skins or terrible tastes.

Sometimes the gifts drift down and go back up again. Sometimes they plunge down through deep sky, farther than I can dive even when I breathe the other way. Sometimes gifts lie like lures in the current, still tied to Those Above.

Sometimes these gifts take things away from our world. I, Seeshi, do not like these snatching gifts, though my mother tells me such exchange is natural.

Every once in a while, a gift comes to stay. Then the challenge is how best to appreciate such a gift.

* * *

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Net Weather came in the night to a place where we had never seen it before, a place where we had always been safe.

During this storm of Net Weather, so many nets swept through our skies, snatching every sort of creature, that even those of us with net cutters were frightened.

The nets came to where I flew with my mother and my sisters and our little ones. Three of my sisters and I were leading the pod, with the little ones behind us where they would be safe, beside them and behind them more sisters, and our mother near the center of our pod. We flew away from the nearest net and found that we flew toward another. We went down and the nets went down too.

I had seen nets snatching others from the sky, had seen friends and others die thrashing when the nets were too strong for cutters, when there was nothing I could do for them.

I panicked!

I forgot that our littlest could not shift forms yet, could not breathe deep sky!

I dove deep, deeper than nets, deeper than dolphins, all the way down to total darkness, where some creatures carry their own light, and where I had to breathe the other way. I flew as fast as I could away from Net Weather, and then, after a long dark time, when I could no longer hear the screams and thrashings of the dying, I made my way slowly up out of deep sky, a layer of sky at a time so that I would not harm myself as I changed back to light sky breathing.

In the storm I had lost the rest of my pod. My mother, my sisters, the little ones still in their otherforms. None had followed me down to deep sky.

I feared for my family. I could not taste their traces or hear their whistles or clicks. They did not answer my calls. I did not know if the nets had caught them. I did not know what I would do without them, without the bump of a sister's shoulder against mine, the brush of a mother's fin, the tickle of a littlest tail against my belly, the whistles of us always together. I had never been away from the rest of them for a whole night before, and already I could feel a cold darkness inside my chest, a wanting for something that wasn't there.

I was too tired to search far for my pod after a night in the deep. It was

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very cold down there, and pressed hard against me, and the air was thin and food was hard to find.

I left the wide sky places and went to a place of solids, where perches rose up from below and almost touched thinner sky, where warmth and light and color came down from above, but never nets. All the solids were alive, and many fish and other creatures lived among them. I wanted to rest and reclaim my strength where the sky was warm.

Soon enough I caught some of the food that did not sting or bite. I fed and felt better. Eating always cheered me, except for that time I had tasted poison spines because my sister Shieh-shieh dared me to; then I gave everything I had eaten back to the sky, and Mother made Shieh-shieh eat sponges for endangering one of our pod.

After I fed, I flew down to rest on the slidy solid that was not alive. I found a good little cave near the bottom of the reef and only had to chase a few creatures out of it before I settled to rest.

I dreamed of lying on top of the sky with my family, gazing up into the thinner sky at lights like those one saw in deep sky, as though our own sky were at the bottom of some other sky and if we could only fly up through thinner sky, we could climb up to a distant warm sky. Warmth at my back my sister, flicker of fingers through my hair my mother, whisper and whistle in the darkness my pod around me, where it belonged.

A shadow woke me. Something large flew above. If it were one of the sharks that bit people, I needed to know. I had lost my cutters in the confusion of the nets the night before and could not kill a shark without them, so if this were a shark, I would need to stay hidden.

It was not shaped like any shark I had ever seen. It was more like Those Who Dwell Above, with two long round side fins such as people have that end in starfish hands, and two tails that ended in stubs like those of other Dwellers Above I had seen flying near the edges of the sky. The first-going part of this creature was big and round like an anemone closed over a meal, only it shone bright as gold-scaled fish.

I watched it, looking for the part of it that was a mouth. If it had big teeth, it would probably want to eat big things like me. Its bulging head had three large dark spots, eyes on either side and perhaps a toothless mouth in the middle. Though the mouth looked open, no sky flowed in or out.

I saw that it was still tied by dark lines to the thinner sky above.

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Edging out from the cave a little, I looked up and saw, lying on top of the sky, the shadow of one of those big hard clouds that drop gifts from Those Who Dwell Above.

Gifts. And nets.

So this gift, still tied to its cloud above, was not wholly given; possibly it was a test or a lure.

I thought of my pod and of being alone.

I had seen a person alone once. She was sick by the time my pod found her, drifting, her skin and scales peeling from her; scavengers followed her, nibbling on her. We fed her the best food we had, but she never got better. She whistled the names of her lost pod when she spoke at all. Nothing we did seemed to matter to her. She died and went down to deep sky.

Unless I could find my pod soon, I feared I too would catch the sickness of being alone. Would I fly through all levels of sky, crying for my lost pod, letting nothing console me? Would I fall to pieces and eventually drop to the deep, drifting down through different layers of cold and crushing until I died?

I looked at the gift. Its mouth looked large the way a whale's mouth looked large, open to the sky to sift; and yet I could sense no flow of sky into the gift, though streams of silvery thinner sky rose from it.

In shape it was more like a person than other things I had seen since I lost my pod.

Two tails.

One person alone.

A gift.

I flew out to it. I looked into one of its eyes, but saw nothing looking back at me. I touched its head and found it hard as dead coral, not slick, scaled, or soft-sided. But it was alive. It felt my touch. It turned and looked at me with its mouth.

Inside its mouth was a face! It had already eaten a person!

I pushed away from it and flew back toward the reef. It tried to follow, but it could not fly, only shuffle along the slidy bottom like a crab. I hid long before it arrived.

Still, it followed, almost like a littlest chasing its pod. Maybe it had the alone sickness too, or maybe it was like a shark and sought food. I watched it and thought of my mother.

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The face in its mouth looked alive still; its eyes moved, its mouth moved, and the creature did not swallow it.

I had a strange feeling in my center, mourning for the eaten thing that did not die. It had a face like the faces of Those Who Dwell Above, those who flew only at the edges of our sky.

It had a face like mine.

The creature that had eaten it had hands at the ends of its side fins like mine, hands like my mother's and my sisters'.

My hunger for my family lifted me out of my hiding place. I went to this creature, this eaten thing, and stroked along its side fin, wanting only the touch of another person like me. Its hands lifted and held my shoulders.

And I was not alone.

If I had had my cutters, I might have been able to cut the eaten person free of the eater; but I had only teeth, and I could not bite through coral. The shape of this person confused me; eaten was like me, and eater, except for the two tails.

I called the names of my pod, wondering if either of the creatures I was near would answer with names from their own pods.

Nothing spoke back to me.

I feared in all of me that the Dwellers Above had taken my family in the nets the night before and killed them, that among the whistles and shrieks of the dying I had heard my own family crying out.

Gifts came from Those Above, and nets, and lures, and tests.

This gift held tight to my shoulders. It began to scuffle back toward the shadow of the hard cloud above.

Those Above had taken my family. Perhaps this eaten-and-eater was a new family.

I made my shoulders slippery and slid from the gift's hold. I bit through the lines that tied the gift to Those Above, claiming it. I needed at least one other to fly with me or I would surely go mad.

Many spheres of thinner sky rose from the gift's severed lines, and it struggled. It tried to rise back to thinner sky.

I put my fins around it from behind, where I would not have to look into its terrible mouth, where it could not bite me. I felt its thrashings and heard sound from it, sound that made no sense.

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I thought of my sister Shieh-shieh with nets snaring her, cutting her, how she would have fought to free herself.

For an instant I wondered if I had somehow become net.

But how could that be?

After a time the creature I held ceased its struggles. It came quietly with me to my cave, and lay close, where I put it. I pulled one of its side fins around me as though it were my sister, and then I could sleep.

"Hi! It's me."

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This collaboration by George Guthridge and Janet Berliner is one of the strangest stories we've ever published. We suggest that you read this story first, and then come back to the introduction.

All right! Good. Now, to answer the question some of you may have: George is alive and well and living in Alaska with his new wife. He is teaching and writing; he has received national recognition for both.

Janet Berliner's writing and editing career has taken off. She has recently edited two well-received anthologies, one with David Copperfield and the other with Peter Beagle, and has just started a third, with Joyce Carol Oates.

Notes Toward a Rumpled Stillskin

By George Guthridge compiled and edited by Janet Berliner [1]

I'LL TELL THIS LIKE SUZI'S heart, cold and hard. Like the land I love.

Eating, she and I, at Fat Freddie's, amid Iditarod frenzy. Anticipation of the buzzer announcing another musher finishing the race suffuses everything like grease from the kitchen, where dishes tilt against stainless steel. Salad bar looks unchanged since I ate here last, lemon pudding pockmarked like the moon.

I focus across the frozen sea, aware that Suzi is avoiding my eyes — though not out of respect. Have I again offended a friend? Socially I am clumsy as a new snowshoer.

[1]This is the only story that seemed relatively complete among several dozen partials in the PowerBook George's former wife, Mary, sent me. He and I had collaborated on fiction projects for over twelve years. Knowing George's distaste for diluting local color, I did not add context clues for such terms as *Outsiders* — those of us in the contiguous U.S.

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Out on the ice, golfers in parkas putt amid planted evergreens and cardboard cutouts of moose wavering in the wind. A diamond-shaped, silver-orange sun. Thank the heavens Western Alaska is cruel. Usually keeps Outsiders away, else views be ruined by those who think the warmth of wintry sun can be captured by a Kodak.

Tourists again have descended, like bullflies in summer. Granola types, this time of year, desperate to fit into a world they have not earned. Braided ponytails on both sexes. They compare REI coats, discuss proper North Face pitons, ogle Eskimo ivory, perform swing steps that shame the locals.

Suzi seems not to care about the Iditarod. Sullen. Body language angular and brittle as shelf ice. It haunts my blood: whale song beneath the frozen sea.

I have lived too long in the Arctic.

I have lived too long.

Other than the occasional sweet but ephemeral release through writing fiction or by attending weekday Mass during summers Outside, my only real peace the time in the mental ward near 'Frisco.

I know too well the cool calm of a shotgun beneath the chin.

"You never use your Eskimo name," she says morosely.

"I'm no wannabe" — accepting a $3.50 milkshake from the waitress. "Besides, I have difficulty pronouncing it." Feeling undignified as usual, I drink from the metal cup, straw against cheek. "Everyone laughs when I say it."

"I wouldn't laugh."

The sadness in her voice is compelling.

"*Suklugraq*," I tell her.

She laughs. Bitterly.

"Parakeet-auklet," she says. "No wonder everyone laughs. Who in God's name gave you a name like *that*?"

"My high-school students."

"Your national academic champions? But those kids loved you! They used to say you're half Eskimo."

"I'm the man without a culture, remember?"

She orders three coffees, a steaming triad. Plain, mocha, amaretto. Saves waitress-waiting, she told me once, without amusement.

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Hiding behind the milkshake feedbag, I ask, "Go to the B.O.T. later?"

Desultory shake of her head, hair flipping, black gold. She knows why I suggest the bar. Get her drunk, she'll want me. Sexually. Socially.

She hasn't been soused in years. Not even a tippler anymore, I don't think.

I stare outside, ashamed of the suggestion. I'm a social climber, climbing down. Ladder descending beneath the sea.

Too many winter nights.

Long silence, in a land and among people where silence is valued, but not this time. Maybe the other teachers' savagery after the kids began winning Future Problem Solving competitions was not without reason. The kids are studying too much, they said; you're pushing too hard. And I — feeling cornered back then, wanting only to cover my head with my hands and arms. Cower. And cry.

"I'm sorry," I mutter. "I didn't mean..."

We both know I'm lying.

"You're never mean. You just don't think. Your white half coming through, I guess."

She touches my wrist. Fingertips like lambskin. I nearly shiver, despite her warmth and the kitchen heat. We avoid each other's eyes.

"Order up!" snaps the cook. Reed-thin body and voice.

Fat Freddie doesn't cook anymore.

"*Suklugraq*," she says softly. "I need to tell you something. About names. And little men. I need to understand."

I want to beg off — I'm in no mood for a diatribe about love gone sour, even though Suzi is a poet both in heart and in fact.

Her fingers remain on my wrist. And I have been, oh, so long without a woman in my bed, much less my life.

"My people would laugh at me for not understanding," she says. "And your people — since when do they understand anything? But the kids...they say your heart smiles even though you're forever frowning."

What heart I have — sinks. Why can't she want me for *me*? My caring constantly defined not by self or even culture, but by career: the teaching that has brought such fame, such misfortune, such unfulfillment.

The teacher in me rises and settles, awaiting another deluge.

She begins, this Suzi of downcast eyes and hair rich as Alaskan oil.

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"Once upon a time" (she says to a plastic tablecloth stained with coffee and puckered with cigarette burns) "there lived a King Islander...let's call her Gwenivere. Gwenivere Muktoyuk, daughter of John Muktoyuk and Delphina Kasgnoc." Now she looks at me, eyes cold. "As I am daughter of John Muktoyuk and Delphina Kasgnoc. Granddaughter of Utamana, who first said 'the sea is our garden.' Iilana, who survived forty-four days out on the ice. Aalik, who refused to speak the name Pilgrim River missionaries gave people like yellow stickies on refrigerators. Mugigtag, the greatest King Island storyteller."

What a fool. Am I.

I have descended another rung beneath the sea. Though lacking eagle feather and sage, she is invoking the protocol of a talking circle. Here in Fat Freddie's, in a town where surely no one has said anything important since before buildings popped up like molars through the gray, gold-laden sand, she is about to speak not of heartbreak but of her soul.

"Like most King Islanders, Gwen lived here in Nome. She divided her time between creating non-traditional ivory carvings during winter and diving for gold during summer...."

Suzi's Tale

Gwen was unique among her people's young women, not only for her gold diving but also because she was a virgin. The latter brought her a certain notoriety. She was called a prick-tease though she was anything but, since she informed her dates of her boundaries. Their frustrations might be less if they stopped before the embracing began. Ski pants, *kuspuk*, sweat pants and bra could come off, but the red panties stayed. Some boys swore they were glued on.

She wished she could live a normal life, but she had resolved to be true to the voice of the loon — the sacred loon — that had come to her in a dream. *Make the man with the snow-white face your first lover*, the voice called to her one masturbatory winter-solstice night, the eve of her thirteenth birthday. The demand so shook her yet filled her with awe that she kept her unvoiced promise despite her classmates' laughter and derision.

Not that she didn't wonder about the voice and message. Was it truly

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a loon that had whispered? And *snow-white*...was that metaphorical or literal? She began attending Mass more regularly, watching the priest's face for signs of purity. And Mr. Denbar at school, who talked from behind her while looking down her sweatshirt. He bragged about having been to Hawaii *four times* in two years — but still he was pale as a ghost.

She felt walled up. She was sure that she was crazy, that outside the cell of her mind there were no real snow-white men.

How long, she wondered, would this imprisonment last?

During January of the year after high school, she missed a period and sensed a new sentence was beginning.

On Valentine's Day she trudged against the wind to Bering Straits Health; her virginity and her pregnancy were confirmed. The father, a fifth-year senior — never mind who he is — seemingly had produced sperm whose swimming prowess equaled his in the Nome-Beltz pool. Whether the sperm had slipped through her panties as though through a sieve, or one sperm pulled aside the elastic so speedier ones could shoulder past, was anyone's guess.

As she walked home, wind buffeting her back, the voice returned. She did not look around, not wanting to give the voice the satisfaction of her fear. She had given too much satisfaction lately.

Her mother proved gleeful over the prospect of a grandchild.

Her father slammed her head against a hollow-core door. Not because he minded the pregnancy but because she would not reveal the name of the boy who had impregnated her.

She said nothing. The boy, she decided, was not the father.

His sperm — not his spirit.

The child belonged to the snowy-faced man who had possessed her mind but never the rest of her.

Weeks passed, her silence deepened, and when breakup came she loaded her neoprene drysuit and power-jet unit into her Datsun and headed north before the tourists did.

God and gold would bring the child good fortune.

She took no safety-man. She and her father had served that function for one another for years, but it was the partner's job to fuel the compressor, not the other's anger. Diving for gold alone is foolhardy; doing so in the Arctic is insane. The thought made her drive faster.

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The previous August, she had done preliminary sniping in a backwash where the Pilgrim escapes the Teller Hills. The river had a gradient of thirty feet per mile, ideal for placer gold, with only a six to eight foot overburden over slate-phyllite bedrock. The bend cut the stream at ninety degrees.

A gold-diver's dream.

Get in and get out, she told herself as she reached eighty-seven mile.

Just like the boys had wanted to do.

She chuckled bitterly, backed the Yamaha 350 off the trailer, packed up, went jouncing across niggerhead tundra and then down the washes and into willow thickets, branches slapping the machine. A snowy owl winged into the air, so startling her that she let go of the throttle and accidentally killed the engine. Was *that*, she wondered as she angrily kicked into neutral and thumbed the electric start, her mythical man?

Then the river was suddenly before her — you know how that happens in Alaska — burbling as it snaked among willows, surprisingly shallow despite the spring runoff. For the first time in months, she felt at ease.

The hordes of beat-up pinks were gone, but the other color was still there, clear even among the silt. Along the cutbanks, what appeared to be gold sparkled in the breaking morning light. Iron pyrite. She knew that placer gold never sparkles, but rather looks like dull, dirty, hammered brass; so at first she had been hesitant to snipe this section of the stream. Surely some novice would long ago have displaced the overburden and scoured the crevices, a fool after fool's gold.

Yet the crevices had appeared pristine, and she had ended up with enough in her sample bottles to pay for gas, truck insurance, three bags of groceries at AC — which is saying a lot.

Perhaps the pyrite had kept away serious gold seekers; and the thickets, the tourists.

She set up camp on a sandbar, thinking of when June would arrive and the mosquitoes and no-see-ums descend. Then she'd maintain roaring fires, sucking in the little fuckers. She hated bug dope and Skin-So-Soft.

A quarter mile below camp, where the river deepened to a dozen feet, she launched her compressor. A four-banger. She had wrapped its styrofoam billets in duct tape and fiberglazed them to keep them from deteriorating. She secured the platform by rope to fat willows on each side of the pool.

The next morning she donned the drysuit and, following a crevice

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that slanted toward midstream, discovered a gold trap beneath the overburden. She surfaced, pulled the regulator from her mouth, and yelped so joyfully that a magpie trotted from the beach. She removed her mask and, trailing the air hose, slogged onto shore.

She was seated on a rock, examining the gold she had tweezered into her sample bottles, when the thicket rustled.

She jerked up, sniffing for griz stink, thinking about that granola who heliocoptered into backcountry — that woman who poo-pooed warnings about packing a weapon and ended up playing dead while a griz chewed off everything from the biceps down.

That's why real Alaskans enter wilderness well-armed.

She chided herself for leaving her ought-six and twelve gauge at camp. And the .44 Magnum she usually kept close?

Left, in the delirium of gold fever, in her dresser in Nome.

Only one thing to do. Head for the depths and hope the bear did not feel like fishing.

Then she realized the movement was too subtle for a big animal, despite a griz's grace. Maybe porcupine or wolverine.

Out from the willows stepped a dwarf dressed in a tattered sealskin coat, who swung a lariat and lassoed her.

She lurched back, but was jerked from the rock. He dragged her across wet sand. Fighting unsuccessfully to free herself, she scrambled to her feet and ran *at* him, intending to head-butt the little bastard. He turned to run.

The air hose, strong despite seeming flimsy, and still connected to the compressor, betrayed her. She was yanked from her feet.

Darkness drank her....

When she awakened, rope bound her arms. She was still on the sand, the compressor stuttering. Liquid too warm for water trickled down her forehead.

"You hit a rock," a looning voice said.

In pain, she squinted up at spindly naked legs, knobby-kneed and bowed like those of some elders, a yellowish penis peeking from under the coat. The sleeves were gone. The dwarf had gray-brown, misshapened arms.

She stared at the face. The mouth was scabbed as if with cold sores or frostbite. The rest of the fishbelly-white face was gone. A lump of nose. Empty eye sockets.

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Had she been less afraid, she would have shuddered in sympathy, for she knew the reason for what seemed a mask.

Nitric acid. Regardless of her father's warnings, when testing gold she once poured the water into the acid rather than the reverse. Dead flesh still mottled her forearm from the splatters.

The dwarf's face looked like it had been knocked into a nitric-filled gold pan.

Now she sensed who he was. One of the *Cingssiik*, the Little People. Although born and raised in Nome, she belonged to King Island, amid whose icy boulders Little People are prevalent, perhaps because of the island's confines. The relationship between them and King Islanders is symbiotic. Familiarity but not fondness. For Little People, Eskimo children make good table; in turn, fear of Little People makes good tales — and helps keep kids in line.

"You can't have my child!" Gwen blurted.

"Who would want it at this stage," he knelt and prodded her belly with a finger, "except an abortionist?"

She ceased struggling, knowing it was useless. Sensing the strength of his thin fingers, the power in those sightless sockets, she retreated into herself.

Sometimes on hunts, surrounded by gold and brown tundra and the Seward Mountains rising in the distance like points of a crown, the essence of the land flowed as if a whirlpool were swallowing all. Separated from time as if at the bottom of the sea that is the universe, she experienced a clarity of vision and purpose — a calm that seemed set as though in balance against the nervous fever that seized her whenever she drank or discovered a pocket of ore. Something ancestral; for at the bottom of that pooling sea was a voice she could hear but not understand, deeper and more distant than the looning sound that hovered above her now. That deeper voice, she sensed, came from King Island, with its grating and moaning of pressure ridges and the cries of auk and murre and cormorant, a place where no loons lament and the desire for gold exists only in the tales of white men's greed.

"You will work my claim," the Little Man said, "and I will work my claim, and when the child is born I will eat the afterbirth...and carry the placenta to some finer place."

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He cackled, and his hands roamed her as if assessing a prize, now unzipping the drysuit, awkward with the ropes, pulling back the rubber and pulling down her thermalwear, exposing her hips. While his fingers explored, she lay looking up from the bottom of her sea, sending her mind past the sun to the stars hidden behind the light.

When he moved higher, pulling up the thermalwear, noisily suckling her breasts, she heard King Island call from beyond the sun. She remembered the lore of the Little People. How dangerous they are, how deceptive — yet how easy to control if you learn their names. They bury nail parings and feces so humans won't find a part of them. Clothes and their own children and their gold and stolen ivory mean nothing to them except as buffers against winter. The only hold a human can get on them is to grasp their truest possession — their names, which mirror their souls.

"If I gather your gold," she asked in a voice that seemed not her own, "will you let me go?"

He cackled again. "I'll see."

He lowered his head once more, and she resolved that she wanted nothing from him except release. Whatever riches he might have cached among these hills could not be worth the risk of her life or that of her child. He appeared to have nothing: more leper than leprechaun. And if he could grant three wishes, as some insisted? She wanted only escape, safety, an easy delivery come October, a healthy child.

One too many wishes anyway, she told herself.

His fingers again violated, and she took herself beyond the sun.

When reality intruded, it was nearly midnight; dusk had descended. She was tied to a log as if on a leash, the stuttering no longer from the compressor but from her four-wheeler, sloppily loaded with her supplies, cresting the hill. He rode like a local, knee on the seat, absorbing bounces. Yet how, she thought, could he steer without sight?

He couldn't. At least not well. He hit the log, toppled across the handlebars and fell groaning onto the sand, where he lay huffing and softly, angrily swearing. When he rose, she was on her feet, dancing like a fighter, ready to kick him. He dodged as she snapped up her leg, hit her in the stomach with his fist. She fell, gasping and nauseous, and wondered if he'd killed the baby.

He lifted her to his shoulder, dumped her across her possessions like

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a sack of flour, strapped her down with bungee cords and mounted the machine. "I'll come back for the compressor," he said, backing away.

They jounced along the bank for an hour beneath the moon, took a shortcut, pitching and yawing over niggerheads, and returned to the river, where he dumped her onto a gravel bar below a cascade that cut through basalt. After heaving half her gear onto his back, he led her by the rope behind the waterfall, into a dripping cave slimed with fungus. She did not resist. She wished she could be free of the drysuit, which chafed her skin despite the thermalwear, but struggled to put the misery from her mind. Did he intend to violate her with more than fingers? There was an ache and anger in her such as she had never known before.

Around her neck he clamped a metal collar welded to a thick chain, padlocked it, and wordlessly retreated into the spray. He was gone for what seemed a day, during which she slept regardless of her discomfort, though physically she was not tired. How many other women had he imprisoned? she wondered. The chain, linked to a U-bolt on wire around a boulder, appeared ancient.

She looked around for bodies or bones, saw none — though she could not see past the boxes and assorted trash further back in the cave.

"They'll search for me," she said upon his return. "The Datsun..." She was angry with herself for revealing so much. Had her father raised a fool?

"I left it at seventy-mile," he said. "Ruptured gas tank. Your four-wheeler tracks now say you headed cross-country toward Hot Springs. Machine's in a gulch. They'll think you were eaten by a bear, and that someone stole what you left behind." He shrugged. "It happens. Can't trust anyone, what with Outsiders pouring in."

She looked at the blank sockets.

"I'll enjoy delivering the child." He turned his face toward her chest. "And the child will enjoy suckling. Fatten him up."

She spat. "So you can kill and eat him."

He wiped the spittle from his cheek and, grinning, licked his fingers. "Too many old women among you Eskimos. Too many old-wives' tales."

"Promise you won't hurt the child."

"I'll...see."

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He gave her clothes, helped her undress without touching her, found the vaseline and talcum powder among her things to anneal the chafing, laid down the tent as a tarp, unrolled her mattress and let it blow up, pulled her sleeping bag from its compression sack. He slept in the damp, huddled fetus-like, fists against knees.

In the morning she went to work at his command, thinking he might release her if she filled the sample bottles. For a *Cingssiik*, he knew few technicalities about obtaining gold. Little People were said to be expert.

He obviously had selected the site because there was dust sprinkled in the overburden. It made her heart race, but when she trenched the spot and sucked the black sands and gravel up through the sluice, she understood the area's subtle secret.

A stream entered the river just above his site, and in the scallop of a high hill some three miles away, she saw the remains of an old hydraulic mine. Its tailings had worked down the stream, lining this part of the river in reverse deposition. Low-grade ore had been dug out first, followed by intermediate gravels and then tailings from the rich bedrock.

The top layer of river overburden contained considerable gold. Below it, there was none.

She surfaced laughing at him as he sat on the dredge, feet dangling in the water while he held the chain still linked to her neck and watched the sluice box with an owl's intensity.

When she told him that the site was basically barren, he yanked the chain so hard it nearly ripped off her head.

"You lie!"

She choked, treading water. "See...for yourself!"

He pointed toward the empty sockets. "With these? Even on land everything's only shadows!"

Dragging the chain, he pulled her toward the dredge, but she called out that she would try again, and he let loose. Again she dived.

For not the first time, the subsurface world with its bubbles and the sound of her breathing resonating through her skull brought tranquillity amid chaos. How childish before, she thought, to have pretended she was shutting out pain whenever she descended. Her parents' bickering — especially when her father had been drinking — the whimperish insistence of the boys with their fingers cupped in her hand at the edge of her

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panties, the homework assignments she had not cared to understand because to her the world was all gold and golden-brown, not the stuff of algebra.

How insipid her revulsion toward those petty problems, compared to this!

Grim with determination, she followed a crevice down beneath the overburden, keeping the scooped area small. No sense taxing herself, when she knew she'd find nothing.

Then, in a fissure narrower than the width of her hand, she spied gold more precious than placer.

She moved her head, letting the small amount of water she kept in her mask clear the faceplate. Could it be? Her heart thudded in her ears.

After working the gold from the fissure, she unhooked one of the larger sample bottles from her weight belt and laughed inwardly as the gold fluttered to the bottom. She located another piece, with even greater anticipation — where there were two, there would be others — and wedged the bottle between rocks. A chill seized her. Had he counted her belt's sample bottles? Would he know she was literally undermining him?

A slave, she told herself, moving downstream to work new overburden, is never secure. He should remember that as well.

She tweezered specks of gold into a new bottle until her fingers cramped and she thought her squint would be permanent. After an hour she barely had a grain of gold, much less a pennyweight. She surfaced.

"Nothing! Just lots of sprinkles."

"The bed's loaded with ore!"

"See for yourself." She knew it would set off his harangue, and she reveled in his torment — a small victory over her jailer.

When he was well into diatribe, he yanked off his coat and bellyflopped into the river.

He swam otter-like, turning his torso; dived with arms against his sides. At first she feared he would sense the sample bottle between the rocks, though it was far away, for he *saw*...with his fingers. His hands were everywhere: caressing a current, exploring a boulder, showing her specks of gold even she had difficulty discerning. It occurred to her that on the beach he might have been realizing her rather than violating her, checking if she were indeed pregnant.

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Watching him swim, it also occurred to her that perhaps he was not human but rather descended from a sea mammal; as according to some people she knew, Eskimos are descended from polar bears — the reason for their short legs — a belief most other Eskimos found laughable.

He stayed submerged four minutes, working the shovel and suction hose, exposing bedrock, awkward with the equipment. By guiding his fingers she showed him that no gold lay beneath the overburden. He nodded grimly.

When they surfaced, treading water, he was breathing easily, as if there had been no exertion. "Nothing but flour gold," he said. "You'll have to amalgam."

"Just find another site."

He shook his head. "Your people file claims with assay offices. Mine file with the gods. This is my claim, as you're my claim. I'll remain with what's been given."

She started to speak, then stuck the regulator in her mouth and dived lest her anger surface as well. She was no one's treasure. And amalgam? She would flounder here forever — sucking up black sand and using mercury to separate out flakes of gold. How far downriver did his claim descend? How much overburden must she move?

She sat on the river bottom and watched her bubbles ascend into light. Then she understood. It did not matter how much gold he gathered, only that he cleaned his claim. No cost-efficiency to measure, no depression because of days wasted over pennyworth. For him, the value of gold lay in acquisition, not sale.

Should she tell him the sample bottle's secret?

She swam upward. Would tell him nothing, nothing. But somehow she would learn his name — make him *her* claim — and until she could effect an escape, she would siphon off his claim's *real* gold.

Had she not returned to the Pilgrim to seek the baby's fortune?

"Okay," she said, pulling herself onto the compressor platform and drawing up the hose and neck-chain, "you'll have your wish. We'll amalgam the shit from the sand. Every speck of it."

He looked skyward, sighed low and deep in his throat.

That night, after he camouflaged the compressor, he began to spin tales. She struggled to stay awake lest she offend him and lose what

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emotional ground she had gained. He told her of finding the gold, of wars with ravens, of songs the tundra's streams sing to those who listen. "When I had eyes," he had to shout to be heard above the cascade, "ah, when I had eyes I saw wonders. Dew on foxglove...steam from bears' noses...sun turning clouds to gold, a treasure no one can steal."

He talked about humans as if they were no longer related to her. The greed of roads and rails, the cry that resounds across the tundra when an alder or caribou falls, how human wishes are not fit for soup-stock. Their dreams brought rainclouds, and in their desire for love a mocking laughter lurked. Humans did not deserve to file a claim, much less work one.

"Have you ever touched...another woman?" she asked tentatively.

With a thumbnail he peeled bark from a willow branch and chewed the pulp — apparently his main sustenance. "You are the first. And the last. I will work only one claim. Your coming was not an accident. I prayed to the winds."

"No human has ever claimed you?"

"You mean learned my name."

She sensed there was no other way except to reveal her hand. "Yes."

"So you are aware of the legend. Then this I will tell you. I am not Rumplestiltskin...I know your *unipkaaq* tales. Though you might call me Rumpled Stillskin." He laughed sullenly, touched his face. "Rumpled flesh...but still skin."

He drew the deformed face close to hers. "You need my name, or I will have the child. We both know that."

She saw that within the mouth, hideous and odorous with stinkweed, were tiny filed teeth, pointy as those of pike or piranha.

"I'll grant you three chances to guess my name and seize my soul," he said. "But if you do guess right, I won't confirm it."

His cackle echoed through the cave.

"That's not fair!"

"Fair?" He thrust his wounded face toward her. "Fair is the weather. Fair is the wind."

She worked the following days as though in a dream, names running through her like the Pilgrim around her. Three chances, but only body language, or perhaps emotion featured in a face that was not a face, to tell her she had guessed correctly.

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And then? she wondered.

Her underwater digging and sand uptake grew as feverish as her mind. Her increased production made him treat her more pleasantly. He asked if she were hungry and brought her things, smoked-salmon strips and once a bracelet of woven fireweed, as though her efforts were for his benefit or the desire, like his, to gather the gold.

Amid the bundles and boxes in the rear of the cave, she discovered considerable stored mercury, necessary for retorting. That he was well-equipped, despite his raggedy coat and unkempt hair, did not surprise her. What miner or hunter had not had goods vanish from camp? The skinning knife, laid down in plain sight but suddenly missing, the hats and gloves that sidle away, the fishing rod mysteriously stripped of an eyelet or two. Most are the work of *Cingssiik*.

The days lengthened as the daylight grew, she working ever longer hours. His tale-spinning also became longer, he often repeating the same story, taking up what little time she had for sleep. Irritation replaced avarice. She had half a dozen sample bottles, filled with her special gold, secured on the bottom of the river.

By contrast, the gold she brought him was a pittance. Retorting it was painstakingly slow — mix in the mercury so it clung to the gold flakes, vaporize it off. He was exultant, she increasingly depressed. Her belly was growing, and none of the names she thought of fit the dwarf. She should be choosing a name for her child, not for a *Cingssiik!* Goldman, Goldfob, Goldface, Snowface, Shitface, Snowflake, Goldflake, Goldfinger.

"Guess, and I'll see," he said every night.

Midas, Midol, Midler, Mesuthalah. It occurred to her that the woman in the Rumplestiltskin tale had not *guessed* correctly. Someone had overheard the gnome speak it himself, and passed the information along. What victory was there in that?

"Guess, and I'll see."

"See *what*! Whether you will simply kill my baby, or eat it!"

He was seated, fingers steepled, on a stump he had brought into the cave. Leaning close, he whispered, "I never said I would kill the child," he patted her belly, and she moved back, "and I won't kill it. But I will *see*. I'll have its eyes." He touched one of his sockets. "And the placenta to rebuild my flesh, as you humans do with burn victims, and the afterbirth

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to make me strong again, after the ordeal."

He sat back, clapping childlike, fingers vertical, and watched as the blood drained from her face, displaced by horror.

"So you'll still have the child...don't you *see*?"

And he laughed.

That night, while he lay snoring, she tried to reach something with which to stab him, but the chain prevented it. In her mind's eye she saw a nine-month hourglass, grains dropping, but rather than rail before the image, she forced herself to be calm and enter the hourglass as though she were at the bottom of a sea. Of sand, this time. And then she *knew*.

She would need sand. And time.

"Another golden day for gold," the *Cingssiik* said the next morning, lips wrinkled into a smile, face toward the dawn slanting into the cave. He slit a trout's belly he was about to cook amid grubs and periwinkles. "You *will* work well today."

She did — fearful to arouse his suspicion about her new plan. Acting more haggard than she really was, she waited two days before telling him that the pregnancy was wearing her down. Soon, she said, she would be unable to dive. To extract the gold — *now, quickly* — they needed greater efficiency.

Seeing no disagreement, but rather his tongue touch his lip in anticipation, she suggested they do the retorting with large lots of sand instead of whenever the sluice-box was full. Too much time was lost, she explained, shutting down the compressor, starting up the camp stove, setting up equipment. They should store the sand in the cave, where it would not wash away, until the optimal time for the rest of the process.

He agreed, so the next morning she started uphauling sand with feigned urgency. Once, surfacing, she saw him sitting on the floating platform, clapping with delight. Without spilling a grain, he carried buckets-full into the cave and, as instructed, poured them onto her spread-out tent.

She prayed a rainstorm would erupt before he declared the sand pile too big and ordered her to start the retorting. Stalling, she stayed down longer, watching her bubbles until she was almost mesmerized, and invented myriad excuses why the bucket brigade had slowed.

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One afternoon, as she watched her air ascend into the glow of sun upon the surface, his name came to her. It happened so unexpectedly that her breath caught in her throat...her subsequent intakes so panic-stricken that for a moment the regulator seemed ineffective. *Surface!* she told herself.

Only at the last instant did she overcome that instinct — then lay back on the overburden, wanting to laugh.

She could not have said his name even had she wanted to.

When she surfaced, rain spattered the water. Fierce clouds wreathed the sky. As she climbed out, the storm intensified. The *Cingssiik* was hustling to the cave, buckets in hand, with uncharacteristic disregard for the precious sand. She looked up at the clouds. The rain stung her skin, and she chuckled with irony. For such as he to have a name like that!

Entering the cave, she stripped off her gear, pulled on jeans and sweatshirt and the snow-packs she used for moccasins, and cooked half a dozen tiny ptarmigan eggs he had gathered. She left the camp stove going while she ate.

"Might as well start the retorting," she said. "Storm looks like a long one. Growing darker than Hades out there."

Fool that he was, he happily complied — even offered the first bucket. No word of caution, as she had expected, about taking the operation outside.

She knew that mixing mercury with sand, then burning away the amalgam after the sand was panned off, would produce mind-distorting, even deadly vapors. It would give her a chance to acquire the key, on a string in his coat, and escape.

She hedged her bet. As he leaned forward in anticipation, body language screaming *greed*, she loaded the retorting vessel to the brim. Heated, it would expand, explode — bringing death, the ultimate alchemy.

And hedged her bet a *second* time — placing the outlet pipe within the collecting-pan water rather than immediately above it. The vacuum created by the cooling retorting vessel would draw water into the container, where it would turn to steam and explode, had an explosion not already occurred.

She sat at the cave's mouth, the neck chain at its length, panning the next load of sand while the first amalgam heated. The *Cingssiik* sat with

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hands hovering above the bulb-shaped retorting vessel, looking for all the world like a man hesitant to touch his pregnant wife's belly but captivated by the life within.

She had expected to feel excited, all-powerful, but as she stared down at the plastic gold pan she was sloshing, she felt her heart slapping the sides. The water blurred, and not all the moisture that touched her cheek was from the waterfall.

* * *

Wiping her eyes with a napkin, Suzi wets the napkin in a glass and dabs at her mascara, smearing it the more. She smiles weakly.

"So she blew him up," I say.

She nods. "The explosion was so powerful it cracked the U-ring boulder — the stove was on it — and knocked Gwen into the river. She was damn lucky. The explosion could have killed her, or she might have drowned. She was so shaken she didn't even go back for the key. Just climbed on the four-wheeler, neck chain and all, and drove away."

I am gripping the table. Consciously I let go, look around as if to assure myself that others are not looking. "The name. *What about the name.*"

During the story, she had eaten a reuben. She lifts the plate, staring at her reflection. "Maybe what came to her at the bottom of that river was only self-delusion, like seeing yourself in a stream and thinking it's someone worth watching." She sets down the plate and looks at me. There is a deadness to the eyes, as if nothing exists behind them. "She never could have possessed the *Cingssiik's* soul. His name was an amalgam of the thousand names of God."

She rises, slack-shouldered, trembling. "I'm going to the B.O.T. I'll get drunk, and you can take me home. Do whatever you want to me then, I won't mind." Speaking to the wall, she takes her parka off the peg. "I have my own apartment, away from my parents. My son sleeps in the living room, he won't bother us."

I take hold of her arm. "What about the gold? How could any gold be more precious than placer? That's just stream-gold, there's no difference."

From her pocket she takes a coin, puts it in my palm, curls my fingers around it. "That mine she saw on the hill above the Pilgrim? That was the old Delacroix. There was a gambling house out there during the Rush. Supposedly the owner salted away a fortune, then died working the mine.

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Greedy, I guess. People accidentally burned down the place looking for where he had buried what he'd made."

Like a poker player eyeing cards I peek at the coin, heart pounding.

An 1893 twenty-dollar golden eagle.

More precious than placer.

"That...Gwen...," I say. "She still has the sample bottles?"

Her hand on the door knob, Suzi blinks several times, as if seeing me in new light or perhaps realizing where she is. Her face hardens. "Don't bother joining me. Now, or ever. You're just another little man."

She steps into the wind. As she pulls the door shut, she says, "She never went back to the Pilgrim. She'll never, ever, go back."

It might as well be a wall before me as a door, for I could no more walk through it than through the eye of a needle. I glance at the other diners, who pay me no heed. I sit down. Man without a culture without a conscience.

Once, for vanity, I had a cavity filled with gold instead of silver. For supreme vanity, like the movie star who converted a Rolls to a yellow taxi, I chose a back tooth, so no one could see.

It has begun to ache.

I stare into the night, rubbing the coin, a finger on the tooth.

What good, coming to Alaska: here not for challenge or country but for a fortune, in teaching, I never found. Gone from a Washington chalet to a shack, with no compensatory rise in intellect or insight. What good to coach kids, when my colleagues later relegated the national trophies to the attic? Athletic awards, not academic ones, in the trophy case.

The heart is not taffy; and even that stretches just so far.

Surely the Eskimos, though so accepting, sometimes so gullible, see through me. As Suzi did, finally. My soul transparent as black ice above a bitter sea.

I look at the gold coin, like a Eucharist wafer in my hand, and think of those bottles awaiting me beneath the Pilgrim. Who would know, but...Gwen? Who, the snowy owl?

I am tired of struggling up snow-slicked hills against Arctic wind, when behind me is that ladder into the Sound, welcome now. I know a thousand names for gold, have seen the thousand shades of white on the winter land.

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Someone dims the lights. The final diners rise, move past my table as if by a boulder in a stream.

Night curls around Freddie's like a hand behind a candle flame at bedtime.

My filling aches.[2]

---

[2]George was last seen alive — at Freddie's — on March 11th. His body, bloated almost beyond recognition, was recovered from Norton Sound four weeks later; ironically, the day after Easter. The body had been in the water about ten days. His whereabouts during the interim remain a mystery, as is the question of whether he purposely jumped into the sea or fell through the ice. The funeral was closed-casket. The coroner told me that wave action had rendered the face featureless. The eyes were gone, apparently to gulls; identity was established by clothing and dental records. The body was denuded of valuables, including the gold tooth.

Authors' note: We hope you forgive our little subterfuge. We wanted to maximize visceral and intellectual impact: to cause readers to reflect, if only briefly, about human relationships...and about the relationship between people and pretend.

— George and Janet

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH, we return you to our regularly scheduled issues. The experimentation will be kept to a minimum, and we will publish a fine mixture of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Our cover will illustrate only one story — and it will be a rather stunning horror story by **Ian Watson**.

"The Last Beast out of the Box" is a tale of possibilities: a magical box that when painted with animals brings those animals to life. Only there's something a little wrong with each of them — an endearing deformity, a tendency toward cruelty — something the box's owner will not know...until it's too late.

May will also bring you some powerful science fiction reading. Nebula nominated author **S.N. Dyer** has contributed a tale that's a bit close to the bone. "Sins of the Mother" is the story of wrong choices, the difficulties of teenage pregnancy, and the ability to recreate oneself through technology.

Our other science fiction offering comes from Nebula winner **Alan Brennert**. Alan's stories are few and far between, and each should be treasured for the gem that it is. "Echoes" is a story of genetic manipulation, of a child created to make music — altered to be eighty percent talent and twenty percent technique. But the perfect genes don't make the perfect person, and somewhere, somehow, something goes very, very wrong...

May will also hold a few other surprises, which we will reserve until then. In future issues, you can look forward to cover stories by **Robert Reed** and **Adam-Troy Castro**, short stories by **Lewis Shiner, Harry Turtledove**, and **Mary Rosenblum**, and of course, our usual columnists. So keep your subscription current — and if you don't have one, subscribe so that you don't miss a single issue.

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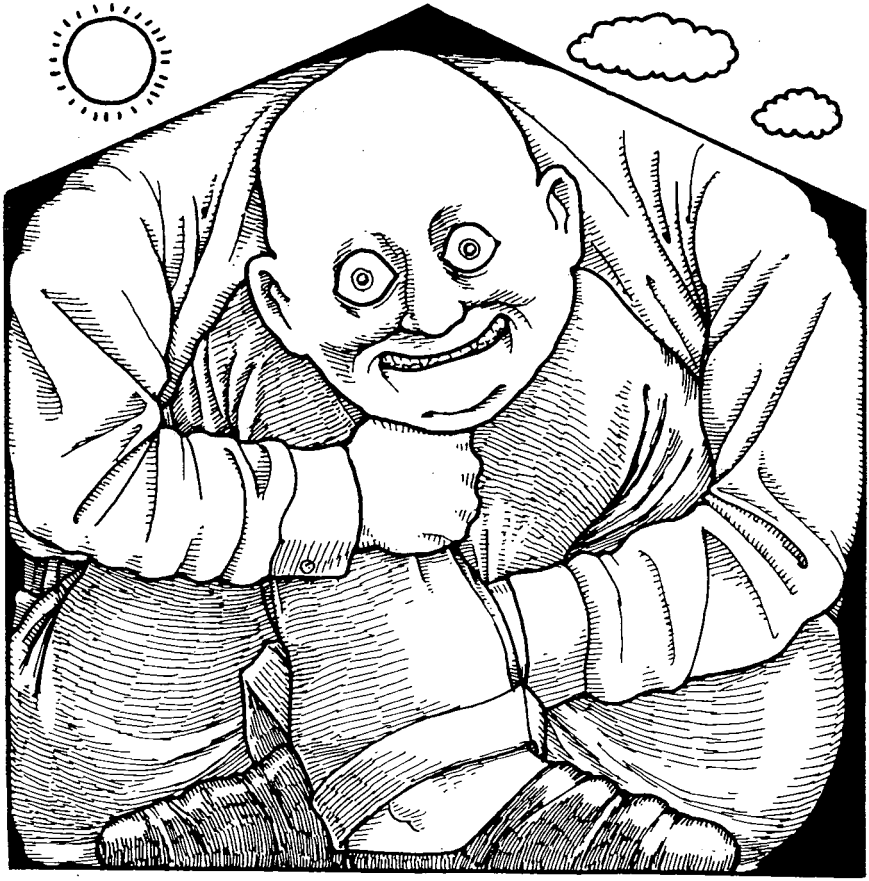
SPECULATIONS

SOON WE WILL BE ABLE TO WORK, SHOP, AND RECREATE WITHOUT EVER LEAVING THE COMFORT AND SECURITY OF OUR OWN HOMES...



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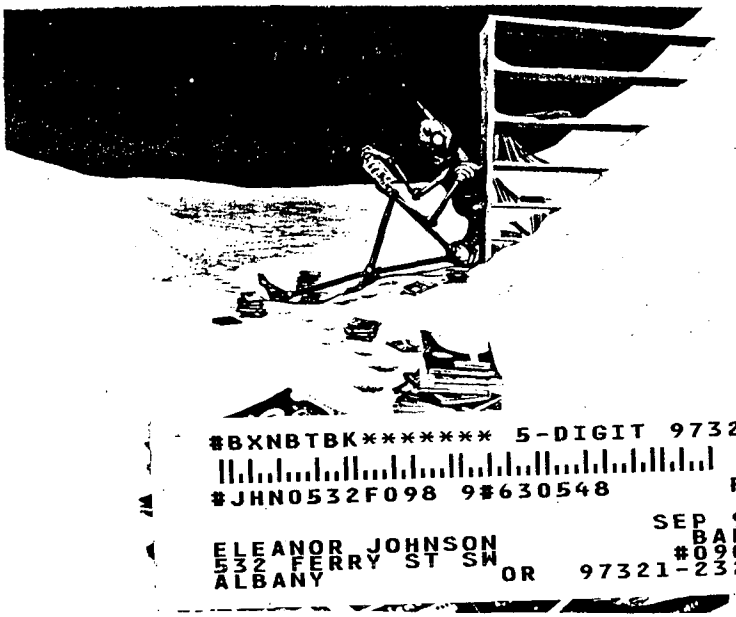
Bargain Back Issue Sale



We're buried under a 10-year accumulation of F&SF back issues, which we must clear out. These issues go back to the mid and late 1980s. For a limited time we're offering them at the bargain price of six different issues for only $10.00 or twelve for $18.00 (plus $1.50 postage and handling). Send order to:

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